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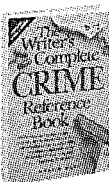
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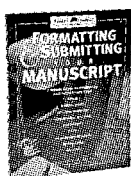
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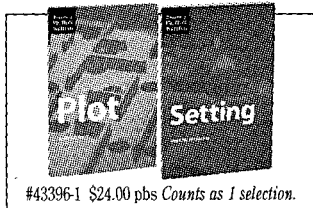
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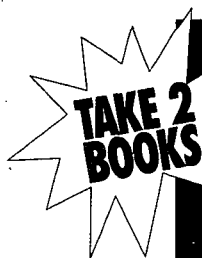
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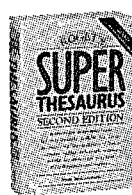
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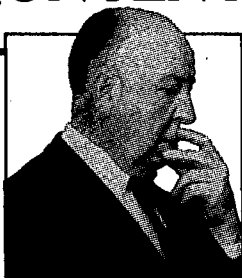
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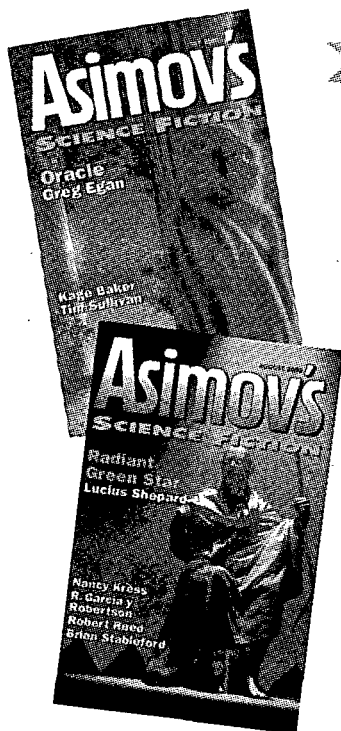
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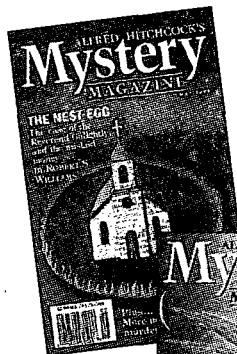
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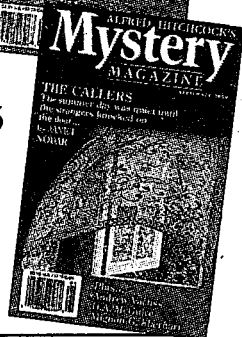
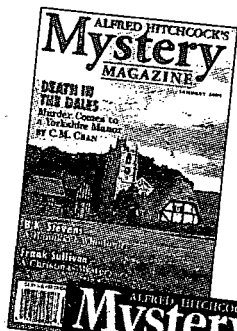
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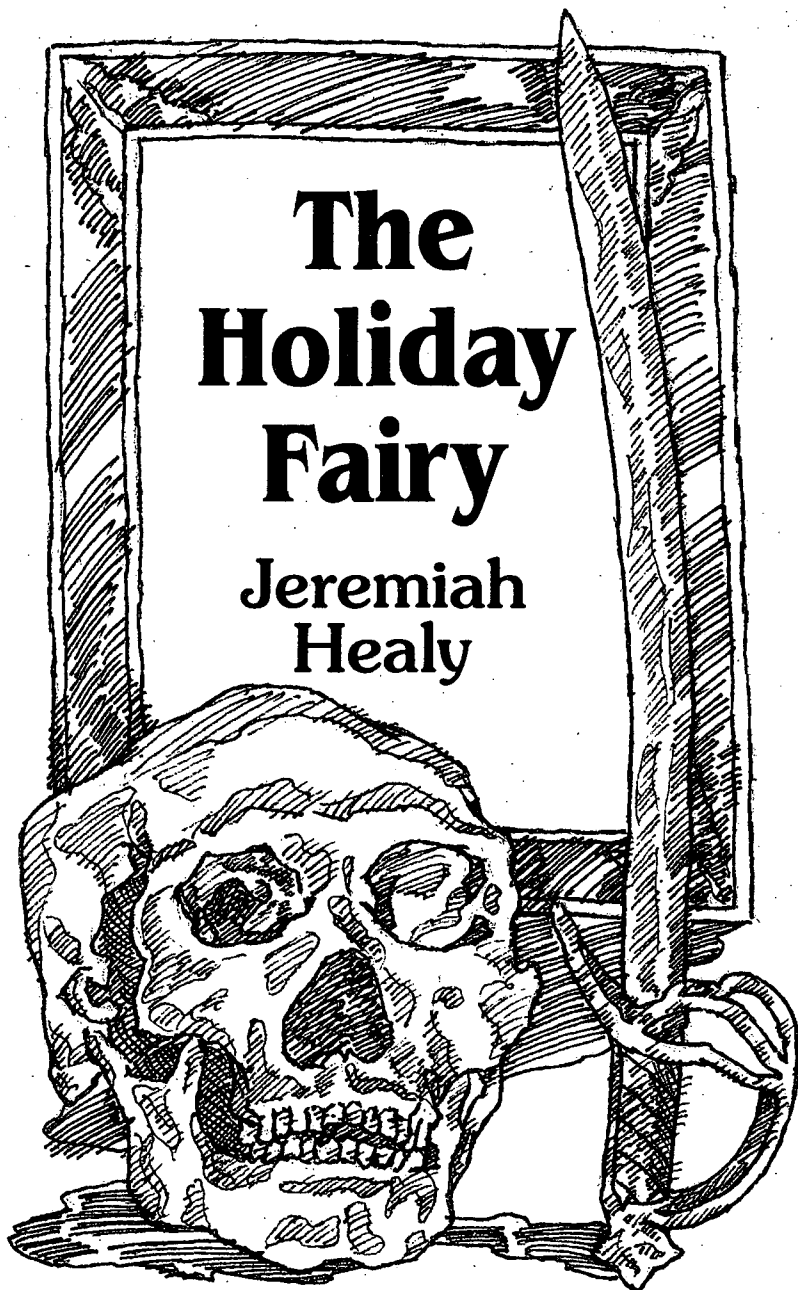
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“You must be the private investigator from Boston,” said the tall, slim woman who’d buzzed me into the bookstore at 129 West 56th Street.

I set the corrugated box I was carrying on her desk, which seemed to function as a combination retail counter and security station. “Just a courier this time around.”

She looked at the box. “Let me call Otto.”

As the woman picked up a phone, I glanced around the first floor of the old brownstone, inhaling that relaxing patina of age that wafts off shelves and molding into the air itself. From the titles displayed cover-out, mostly paperbacks and all crime novels, not surprising when you considered the name of the place was the Mysterious Bookshop. Once in a while, I do a courier run to New York City, usually with jewelry or negotiable bonds for someone who wants the incremental assurance that a private license and a permit to carry provide. That late December day, though, it’d been a rare book dealer who’d asked me to carry a first edition somebody-or-other to a man named Otto Penzler.

As the woman hung up, I could hear footsteps above me, the last few onto the metal rungs of a black, spiral staircase at the rear of the store. A voice like one you’d hear on an evening news program said, “Mr. Cuddy, come up, please. You can leave the package downstairs.”

I climbed the narrow steps, resolving—revolving, actually—into a view of a man in his fifties with

carefully groomed hair and beard just on the gray side of white. He looked sharp in a dress shirt and slacks, body fit but blue eyes filled with troubles.

“Mr. Penzler,” I said, reaching the top rung and his outstretched hand at the same time.

“I’d prefer Otto if you’d prefer John.”

I stopped. “You usually get on a first-name basis with first-time couriers?”

A smile born of wisdom. “Let’s say I’d like your expert opinion on a different matter. Follow me, please.”

The staircase ended in a front room with very high ceilings and a lot of hardcover books that looked old even as I moved by them behind Penzler. He led me through a short corridor with a refrigerator and sink to the rear room on the floor, a magnificent library with the more rarefied air of a gentleman’s club. Something about the arrangement of the books on the shelves in the library gave me the impression that we’d upscaled from Cadillacs to Mercedes.

“Have a seat, John.”

I took one of the leather chairs, Penzler perching his butt on the arm of a similar piece.

He said, “When Kate told me who she was using to send the Wilkie Collins, I made it a point to be here.”

“The ‘Wilkie Collins’ part is more than she told me.”

Penzler grinned. “Actually, that rare book is more the excuse why you’re here than the reason.”

“Which would be?”

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He moved off the arm, stepping around the room as though he were timing his movements to synchronize with his words. "I've been experiencing a number of . . . odd occurrences over the last few weeks, and I'd like someone to discreetly look into them for me."

"Otto, if there aren't a thousand licensed private investigators in this town—"

"I know. And I doubt you're licensed by the state of New York, are you?"

"I am not."

"All right then, here's my dilemma. I need three friends . . . 'interviewed' by a professional, without their realizing that person is working for me. All three may have some contact with a lot of private investigators in the city, certainly any I'd trust with my own business."

"Who are your friends?"

"I'll name them in a minute, but for now, think of three prominent mystery authors in Manhattan."

"Otto, even three local crime writers can't know all the trustworthy investigators in this city. And besides, my Massachusetts license wouldn't impose the kind of confidentiality protection on our conversations that would make me 'trustworthy' for you."

Another grin. "Kate said I'd like you. A 'motherlode of honesty,' she called you." Penzler paused by an empty table with a top about big enough to hold a flower vase. "How about this, then. You hear me out, and if you don't feel comfortable, no problem. If you're intrigued, though, as I think you might be, I'll pay half again your usual rate."

I decided listening would take less time than debating.

"Go ahead."

Penzler tapped the tabletop. "There used to be a skull here, one that Agatha Christie once used as inspiration for a story. Two days ago it disappeared, replaced by a plain white envelope." Penzler opened the only drawer in the table, drawing out three number 10's. "In the envelope was the exact amount of cash that a collector's handbook suggested was the current value for such an artifact."

"You figure the Tooth Fairy might be branching out?"

Penzler didn't smile. "Call it the 'Holiday Fairy.'"

I tilted my head toward the other two envelopes. "What else was taken?"

Penzler glided over to his desk. "A letter opener in the shape of a cavalry sword that Erle Stanley Gardner used for his mail."

"He wrote the Perry Mason books, right?"

"Among other series." Penzler moved toward a wall where an eight-by-ten space of brighter paint was framed by duller. "The third item was a facsimile of the first page of the will of Edgar Allan Poe."

"And money was left for each."

Penzler fanned the three envelopes in his hand as though they were mutant playing cards. "Exactly the right amount, collector-wise."

"Otto, I've heard of people commissioning gangs to steal works of art—"

"—but never somebody doing a forced exchange—"



“—especially where the ‘purchaser’ won’t get more money from somebody else for the item involved.”

Penzler finally sank into cushions of the opposite chair. “Now you see why I need a professional.”

“Maybe not, if you’ve somehow narrowed the suspect list down to three.”

“That was the easy part, actually. I could eliminate most of the customers because they never come back into my private library. And given that we’re talking about only two weeks, I can remember the three people who were here sometime during the day each item went missing.”

“You said the skull was taken just two days ago.”

“Right.”

“And the saber and will before that?”

“Yes. The saber was first, and frankly, when I’d used it and then couldn’t find it the day after, I thought I’d just misplaced it. But that same day one of my staff was taking down all the framed items to give the glass a Christmas cleaning, and when they went back up, the Poe will wasn’t among them.”

“I know this is a painful suggestion, but . . . maybe one of your employees?”

“No. No, my staff here is pretty small, and given their flex hours, nobody was here on all three days at the necessary times.”

“Though three of your friends were.”

Penzler’s brow knit. “Yes. It isn’t the value of the items that bothers me. Hell, our ‘holiday fairy’ has al-

ready given me that. What gnaws at me, John, is that a friend would do this for no apparent reason.”

“Maybe you’d best give me the names of these people.”

A third (?) grin. “Then you’ll help me?”

“If we can come up with a credible cover story for my seeing them.”

A twinkle in the eye, like Santa Claus after Richard Simmons got through with him. “I have an idea for that.”

Standing outside a thirty story highrise overlooking Central Park, I looked down at the notes I’d taken on three-by-five index cards that my client had given me. The first writer was Maury Kronstein, but Penzler told me most readers would know him by his pen name of Ace Stark, collaborator on mysteries by famous tennis stars. The man apparently favored punning titles, as in one where Chris Evert ventured to a dude ranch (*Mount Evert*) and another where Michael Stich saved a fashion designer (*A Stich in Time*). Kronstein/Stark was also the only one who’d ever expressed to Penzler any interest over the years regarding all three items.

Inside the double entrance was a doorman, who led me to a bank of elevators. Getting off on the twenty-seventh floor, I knocked on the partially ajar door. “Just push your way in, please,” said a hoarse but pleasant male voice.

The door was on a strong spring, so I had to put my shoulder to it. Inside, what light the December afternoon gave flowed into the room through seven windows across its

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park-front wall, giving this first-time visitor the disorienting sensation that Central Park was the city and the buildings a receding necklace around it.

"Rather like suddenly discovering the world really is round, eh?"

I cleared a corner of the entry hall and saw a man sitting at a computer hutch rather nicely integrated into a wall unit longer than a stretch limo. His shoulders were stooped; his sweater seemed a size too large. Even his hair, almost jet black, seemed a little big for his scalp. The hollows under his eyes and cheeks reminded me of people I'd seen when I visited my wife, Beth, at the hospital.

In the cancer ward.

"Otto called me about you," said the man without getting up. "But from the look on your face, he didn't mention my illness. Ace Stark, lymphoma."

If he wanted to use his pen name, I wasn't about to correct him. "John Cuddy, Mr. Stark."

"Ace, please. I rather like the sound of it." Stark paused. "Otto did tell you about my tennis mysteries?"

"Yes." I took a chair against a second wall as he swiveled in his. "But not about the view."

Stark half turned to take it in. "Yes. When I was lucky enough to be able to buy this place, it felt as though I were watching the city from the sky." Another pause. "Which, unfortunately, I might be doing soon. But that's not why you're here. Otto said you were doing a necessary background check on him?"

"That's right," I said, bringing out a blank notecard. "He's been proposed for a national literary post, and given the events of the last year in Washington, any kind of nominee has to be vetted."

"Understandable, but I'd recommend Otto highly. I suppose, though, that you have more specific questions?"

"Yes. How did you come to know Mr. Penzler?"

We reviewed Stark's early career of writing part-time while a journeyman player on the pro tennis tour; how Penzler had seen some of his short stories and had eventually gotten him published in book form.

"So," I said, "you know Mr. Penzler well."

"Quite well. And am rather biased, as I mentioned earlier, in his favor."

"Anyone you know who doesn't quite lean that way?"

A frown. "Meaning a potentially negative person you should speak with?"

"That's what I mean."

"Well, I'm sure there are some. One can't live over a half century on this earth and express passionate professional opinions without ticking off someone."

I made as if to glance down at the other two names Penzler had given me. "How about Tanya Washington and Kyle McKray?"

"Tanya and Kyle? Well, they're rather different sorts. Tanya writes a police procedural series about an African-American homicide lieutenant, and Kyle about an Irish-American private investigator."



There was a faint smile toying with the corners of Stark's mouth at that last part, but I didn't bite. "I meant more how they'd feel about Mr. Penzler?"

"Oh, very positive I would say. Otto has praised both Tanya's gritty realism and Kyle's wisecracking dialogue. Will you be talking with them as well?"

"Possibly."

"Well, if you do, please be sure to give them my best."

"You know them personally, then?"

"We served together as judges on an Edgar Award committee several years ago."

"Edgar?"

"The Oscar of the mystery-writing industry. A bust of Edgar Allan Poe. He was—"

"Yes," I said, "I know."

After asking some more detail questions to grease the skids for my cover story, I left Kronstein/Stark and headed for the Upper West Side. Even my cabbie had a little trouble finding the address, which turned out to be a mansion overlooking a leafy strip separating it from the Hudson River. Based on the homes of the first two people on Penzler's list, I was beginning to think I'd chosen the wrong profession.

When I climbed the stoop, however, I could see there were a dozen names block-printed on the elaborate buzzer system at the door jamb, though Washington (in 5A) did seem to have at least the front of the top floor. A minute after I pressed the button, the door

opened, a slim woman in yellow and black Spandex standing and puffing behind it. Her modest Afro was held back by a terry cloth sweatband, but the eyes were what caught you: the golden fire of a leopard's.

"Ms. Washington?"

"Otto's a good guy with descriptions. John Cuddy, right?"

"Right."

"Tanya Washington. Come on up."

We climbed four flights of a pre-War—the Spanish-American one—staircase before arriving at an apartment with a spectacular view across the river of some highrises in New Jersey.

On the whole, I preferred the earlier vista of Central Park.

"Make yourself comfortable."

As Washington brought over two already-poured glasses of what looked like lemonade, I took the couch with a dashiki-patterned slipcover.

Handing me a glass, she said, "Fresh-squeezed."

I tried it. "Like grandma used to keep on her back porch."

Washington flopped into an easy chair with a different dashiki-patterned cover. "And where was that?"

"South Boston."

"Where that busing controversy was?"

"Twenty years ago. It's better now."

Washington's eyes said she wasn't quite buying it. "Otto said you're checking him out for some literary gig?"

"Yes. What can you tell me about him?"

A shrug. "He's always been good to me."

Not exactly a ringing endorsement. "But he hasn't to others?"

"Otto's not crazy about the cosy-style mysteries. You know, like Agatha Christie."

Christie's skull item was the last thing taken. "What does he enjoy?"

"Mysteries, you mean? Oh, legal procedurals like Erle Stanley Gardner used to write."

Gardner's saber replica. "How about Edgar Allan Poe?"

"Him too," said Washington, same fire in the eyes but otherwise a perfectly neutral expression on her face.

We went through the same kind of questions I'd used once already.

"Who else you talking to?"

"Maury Kronstein and Kyle McKray."

Washington clucked her tongue off the roof of her mouth. "Damn shame about Maury. But you'll like Kyle. He's a real throwback."

I went back downstairs alone. Turning right and walking up toward Broadway for another taxi, though, I had to ask myself how Washington could know I'd get her allusion to Kronstein/Stark's illness without also knowing I'd already spoken with him.

Kyle McKray lived in the West Village, a long baseball throw from Washington Square Park and New York University. When I rang the bell of a small white brick townhouse that appeared to belong all to him, a woman's voice—disembodied and squawky—came through the speaker. "Yeah?"

"John Cuddy to see Kyle McKray."

"Try the Sheep's Head."

"I'm sorry?"

"It's a bar, a block east and two down."

I looked at my watch. Two thirty P.M. "You think he'll be there?"

"Beats me. But he isn't here, and the Sheep's Head is where lover boy picked me up last night."

The entrance under the painted and chipped sheep's head on a wooden plaque gave a view of a bar sunk half a level below the sidewalk, with that peanuts and stale beer smell of a hard-drinking joint. There were maybe six people in the dark cavern counting the bartender. When I walked up to him and asked for McKray, a swab towel flicked toward the guy on the corner stool.

Sitting, McKray seemed broader than he was tall, with a divot-scar through one eyebrow and a nose that hadn't pointed straight ahead in recent memory. He wore an orange and blue Mets baseball jersey over cutoff shorts despite the December weather outside. There was a short tumbler in front of him containing three fingers of amber liquid and no ice. By the time I crossed the ten feet toward him, the glass was empty.

"Innkeeper, innkeeper. Another Jim Beam, if you would."

The kind of bad, thick brogue you hear in a grade-C movie with no dialogue coach on staff. "Kyle McKray?"

"And who would you be, lad?"

I probably had ten years on him, but I said, "John Cuddy."

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"I knew it. I can feel these things. Another Irishman."

The bartender brought McKray's bourbon. I ordered a Harp.

"Ah, lager," said the man on the corner stool. "Reminds me of the idea for a novel I never got around to writing."

"About beer?"

"About a lad like yourself who liked it so much he wanted a case of it distributed around his wake at the funeral home. A memento mori, the Romans called it."

I wasn't sure McKray was right in his linguistics, but that didn't appear to be the point. When my Harp arrived, I clinked the pint against his tumbler. "To literature."

"Ah, a fine occasion for a drink."

McKray drained half of the bourbon, and I realized I'd have to cut to the car chase if I wanted anything useful from him. "I understand you're a mystery author yourself."

"Writer," lad. Writer. "Author" sounds pretentious."

"Some of my favorites are Agatha Christie—"

"Brit pap."

"—Erle Stanley Gardner—"

"Legal hack."

"—and Edgar Allan Poe."

"Overrated, and dead like the rest of them."

"The rest?"

"Christie and Gardner. Who else have we been talking about just now?"

Either McKray was a hell of an actor or the names meant no more to him than headings in an encyclopedia. "Did Otto Penzler by any chance speak to you today?"

"Otto? A fine lad he is. But no, I'm

afraid I was otherwise . . . engaged this morning, and other than the fine lady I met here last night and this fine lad behind the bar who's about to grace me with another Jim Beam, I've not talked to a soul but you the livelong day."

At that Kyle McKray winked at me conspiratorially and downed the rest of his bourbon of the moment.

Despite the cold, an afternoon sun shone brightly, so I decided to walk back to Midtown, shuffling my thoughts as though they were index cards, trying to see if they'd fit into some kind of pattern. While I waited for the light at Seventh Avenue and 53rd, a random combination of information made sense, and I refined it during the last three and a half blocks to the Mysterious Bookshop.

A redheaded woman with the springy walk of a good dancer was walking away from Penzler and toward me as I crested the spiral staircase.

She said, "He's all yours."

I followed him back into the library, where he closed the door, something I thought he rarely did.

When we were settled in our chairs, I said, "Maury Kronstein—or 'Ace Stark'—told me you'd called him ahead of time with my cover story."

"And Tanya Washington, too. I couldn't reach Kyle McKray."

"How do you mean?"

Penzler looked at me a little strangely. "I called his house but just got his tape machine."

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"And left a message."

"Yes."

"Would he have been able to hear your voice from bed?"

Stranger look. "I suppose so. I've been to his place, and the door to his writing study is just off the bedroom."

I nodded.

Penzler waited—impatiently but politely—before saying, "Well, did you find out anything?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"I think I've got it, but I'd like to spin it out for you before reporting my conclusion."

"Oh God. That bad?"

"You be the judge."

Penzler settled back. "Okay, go ahead."

I took out the index cards I'd written out with him that morning. "Three items were missing, each from a different, famous, but dead mystery writer. Three current authors are suspects, one of them even expressing interest in the items over the years. Now, none of them could have known whether there were other potential suspects—others who were back here in your library each of the three days in question. At a minimum, however, there were these three."

"Yes, but go back to your prior point. Even those three wouldn't know about each other."

"I'm coming to that. All three know each other—the first told me they'd served on an award committee together. The second seemed to know I'd already seen the first and just happened to mention, sort

of, the three famous authors whose artifacts were stolen. The third claimed not even to have talked with you but did share, out of the blue, a projected novel he probably hasn't touched for years about items somebody contemplating his own death might cherish. He used the term memento—"

"Wait a minute, John. Is Maury Kronstein or Tanya Washington the first writer?"

"In a way it doesn't matter, because neither could have known who would be first."

"I'm sorry?"

"Which of them you—or, as it happened, me as your delegate—would start with."

Penzler shook his head. "You're saying they're all involved?"

"Yes."

"In a conspiracy to steal—or sort of 'buy'—these artifacts from me?"

"No. The artifacts are just the excuse, not the reason. Kind of like my bringing that rare book down from Boston for you."

"The . . . excuse? Then what the hell are they doing?"

"Giving you a present."

"A what?"

"A present. For the holidays."

"John, are you all right?"

"You've been good to each of these writers. They knew each other from that committee, and one of them isn't sure he'll see another holiday season. What better present to give you than a live mystery."

"A live mystery."

"In which you participate as apparent victim."

Penzler sat blinking. He opened his mouth twice to speak but closed



it each time to think a little longer. Then he smiled.

"Maury. I'll bet it was his idea."

"I think so, too, since the others probably wouldn't have known about his interest in the three items involved."

"Plus it's like him to balance out the cast. Two men and a woman's artifacts, two men and a woman as suspects."

"And since they're all mystery writers, adept at planting the appropriate clues, depending on who got seen first."

Penzler shook his head again but this time in a marveling way. "I'd even bet Maury's the one who's holding the skull, the saber, and the will page."

"Because he admired them, and he's thinking about no longer being a live writer himself," I said softly.

"Yes, though even more because it echoes his titles."

My turn to be stumped. "His titles?"

"I told you about the Ace Stark series when we first spoke this morning. *Mount Evert*, *A Stich in Time*."

"Puns."

"And Kyle McKray mentioned that old dog of a story he was thinking of writing."

I still didn't get it. "So?"

Penzler sat back in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his head, obviously quite pleased with himself. And with the present from his "holiday fairy" friends.

"Now put the Ace Stark titles together with the subject of Kyle's novel and you get..."

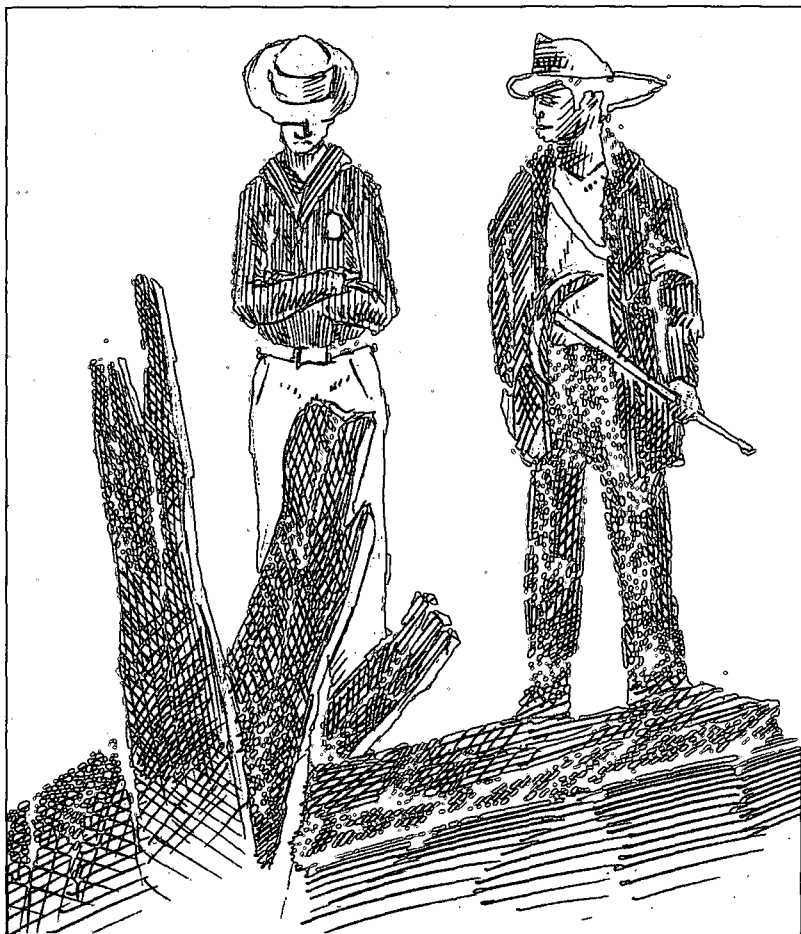
Finally. "Memento Maury."

Penzler lifted his face to the ceiling and roared out a laugh. "God, but I love this business!"

NOTE: "*The Holiday Fairy*" deserved, we thought, a wider publication than it originally received. Otto Penzler—founder of *The Mysterious Press*, winner in 1994 of the Ellery Queen Award for Editorial Excellence, 1976 Edgar winner (with Chris Steinbrunner) for *Encyclopedia of Mystery and Detection*—is also a real bookstore owner and the *Mysterious Bookshop* a real bookshop in New York City. The story was written and given as a holiday bonus to the store's customers in 1998.—Ed.

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FICTION



# DEATH BY NUMBERS

Jas. R. Petrin

*Illustration by Andy Mania*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1102*

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**W**hen the telephone rang on the bedside table, Police Chief Robideau found it with a groping hand while forcing open one eye to seek the time on the glowing clock. It was his constable, Marvin Unger, and there was a strained urgency in his voice that the chief hadn't heard in Marvin for a very long time. The chief listened, said, "Right," and hung up the phone.

"Hoowuzit?" mumbled Mrs. Robideau from the depths of her pillows.

"It was Marvin. There's been another fire." The chief swung his legs out of the bed and reached for his trousers.

"For the sake of all that's holy! Someone's been starting fires here in End of Main for weeks. Can't he look after this one himself without ringing us up in the dead of the night?"

"Not this time."

"Why not?"

"Because it *is* the dead of the night. According to Marvin, there's been a murder."

**T**he shed—what was left of it—was tucked up a back alley behind Burton Street, one of End of Main's busier thoroughfares. The chief arrived to find a monstrous pumper truck bullying its way out of the alley, leaving behind it a vanquished fire reduced to a sodden skeleton of blackened timbers. Standing in the alley was Marvin's car, a riot of strobing, jumping lights. Marvin was leaning against his vehicle with a distrustful look

on his face as if he feared the flames would come alive again at any minute. He came alive himself at Robideau's appearance, scurrying to catch up as the chief strode toward the ruins.

The old shed was a crazy tangle of collapsed beams, one surviving gable end thrusting upward from ground level like a hump. The body, a shape beneath a plastic sheet, lay between two empty, half-burnt crates in the light of Marvin's torch.

"We didn't spot it right away," Marvin said as if that explained everything.

"Who is it?" The chief pulled the plastic aside with the tip of his car key and winced at the sight of the charred, bent form.

"Sally, chief. Sally Vittorio. You can't tell from his face, poor guy, but if you check this out—" he pulled the sheet down farther—"a leg brace. And there's his pins all burnt to hell."

Salvatore Vittorio, substance abuser, panhandler, but also part-time philosopher and political activist, not to mention snooker player extraordinaire with the victory pins to prove it stuck on his shirt like tiny blobs of melted wax. A popular guy on the street. But not any more.

"Murder weapon?"

"Nothing obvious. Could of been removed. Or if it was wood it could of burnt."

"Photographer?"

"Come and gone."

The chief bent his head over the wasted life. "Murder, you said. What makes you think so? Maybe he crept inside for a snooze, and

the firebug came along and torched the place without even knowing he was here."

"Nope," replied Marvin stubbornly, "it was murder. His head is busted."

And so it was. Closer scrutiny revealed that the right side of Sally's skull was broken in, the wound an ugly, ash-encrusted depression. The chief, his mind already taking up the challenge, imagined Sally being struck from behind by a right-handed assailant, falling forward among the crates, then rolling off onto the floor face upwards.

"What do you think, chief? Our firebug's hard at it when the old man happens along, so the firebug picks something up and clobbers him?"

"Possibly." The chief was disinclined to go further with speculation so quickly. "We'll find out. Was there a matchbook?"

Marvin shook his head. "If there is, it hasn't turned up yet. But it's dark. We might find it tomorrow."

Robideau wanted the matchbook cover, one of which had been found at each of the previous arsons with as yet undecipherable markings jotted on it. It was information not yet released to the media, and he and Marvin were thinking the same thing. No matchbook, no connection between this and the previous fires.

"What about the crowd? Who showed up?" The spectators had drifted away with the departure of the firefighters.

"A small bunch, chief. The usuals. It's in my notes."

Headlights swept the mouth of

the alley as two more vehicles wheeled in: an ambulance, strangely silent, and unlike Marvin's vehicle displaying no flashing lights, and a van painted the bilious yellow adopted by fire departments the world over as if there were a shortage of red paint.

Robideau walked over to exchange views with Fire Chief Barnes, who had descended from the van to probe the wreckage with a flashlight.

"Who is it?" Barnes asked in a grim voice, holding the beam of his light on the plastic-covered body. He was a trim, wiry man with a cropped mustache and a military curtness. Told the name of the victim, Barnes sniffed cynically. Barnes had been nursing a bit of an attitude over the continuing string of fires with no culprit apprehended, and this new development hadn't mellowed him.

"Looks like you guys are going to have to get the lead out and nail this character."

"We can't find any," Robideau returned in an even voice.

Barnes was puzzled. "Can't find any what?"

"Any of this lead we're supposed to have. But then there are only the two of us these days. How much lead can there be?"

Barnes studied Robideau a moment, then turned away to survey the rest of the destruction. "All right. Point taken. But you're not the only one dealing with cutbacks, you know. The SOB's forced me to drop another two men last spring just before this nut went on the rampage. I tell you, we're like the



army. Unappreciated until trouble arrives, and then people scream for miracles.”

“You and the army,” Robideau replied. “Yes. And the police as well.”

“You’ve got to demand more resources if you need them. Squeaky wheel. I’m going before the Ways and Means Committee tomorrow to read them the riot act. I’ve got a truck back there at the station that I can’t even use because it needs a three thousand dollar repair job, and when I complained about it, do you know what they told me? They says, ‘Why bother to fix it, Barnes, when you admit you’ve got no one to drive it?’ That’s their attitude. I’m sick of it.”

Robideau stuck around long enough to see the body bagged up for its trip to Al Evans’ funeral home, there to spend a cool night in Prancing Al’s refrigerator while awaiting forensics. Then the chief went home to bed leaving Marvin and Barnes to trade complaints about the lack of funds.

**N**ext morning Robideau drove to his office early, started the coffee brewing, and shoved everything he had been working on to the back of his desk except for the firebug file. That he pulled toward him. The folder was red, selected by his receptionist Claudia Webb, who had lately decided to color-code everything. It would make things easier to find, she claimed, though what she really meant, the chief suspected, was that it would make it harder for him to lose them.

The first couple of fires had got

him thinking about the possibility of fraud. But he’d quickly put that idea aside. The fires were too obviously arsons: No attempt to make them look like accidents. Nor was there doubt about the accelerant: a partially melted plastic jerry can was fished out of the ashes of the first fire, and there had been seven similar fires since then. Finally, there were the notes, if that’s what they were. Each a cryptic grouping of numerals scrawled, appropriately enough, on a matchbook cover. The chief had puzzled over them, wondering if they had meaning or were intended to mislead and confuse. Inwardly he hoped the bug wasn’t one of those criminals most difficult to catch—an opportunist.

Seven previous fires—eight counting last night’s—and all except this one with the matchbook feature in common.

The evidence, mostly photographs, had been collected into brown manila envelopes, one for each location, and Robideau reached into these now and drew out the matchbook covers, ignoring the photos. Though several of the covers had glossy surfaces, there were no usable fingerprints: it was as if they had been deliberately wiped. But the chief was confident that any insights would come from these unassuming bits of cardboard.

He lined them up on the desk. Each bore a unique grouping of sixes and ones, the sixes being squat, short-tailed figures, and the ones tilting to the right. They were in pencil. He reexamined the first of them: 11616661.

Marvin came into the room just then with Claudia Webb, the two making their usual red-eyed raid on the chief's burbling coffeepot. With filled mugs in their hands they peered inquisitively over Robideau's shoulder. Marvin said, "Ha, back at the numbers again. Did you have a brainwave about them in your sleep, chief?"

"What sleep? You woke me up, remember?" Robideau tapped his pen on the desk. "I have a feeling I'm not recognizing something obvious about these."

"I recognize something obvious," Marvin said. "The guy's a weirdo. He's playing games with us."

"Either that or he wants to be caught."

"Nobody *wants* to be caught." Marvin moved his cup in an arc, leaving a trail of dark droplets across the chief's side table. "Not even a weird psycho case."

"So," Claudia Webb remarked dryly from the end of the desk where she was admiring the chief's new computer, "this person is a male, a weirdo, and mentally deranged. Marvin, you're wonderful. Looks *and* brains."

Marvin, who bore a resemblance to Don Knotts, reddened slightly. "Well, it's pretty obvious to me, that's all."

"And nothing is obvious to me," the chief rumbled. "Especially the meaning of these numbers."

Marvin gulped coffee mechanically, fitting his words between each swallow. "Could be phone numbers."

"Ones and sixes? A one will get you long distance, but there aren't

enough digits after it for both an area code and a local exchange."

"Well, if you won't even give it a shot . . ."

The chief sighed and poked his speaker phone. The hum of the dial tone blurted out at them.

"Be my guest, Marvin. Go for it."

Marvin hesitated. "Could be expensive. What if I get Hong Kong or something?"

"If you do, it'll be well worth it. We'll explain to the finance committee that our firebug, not to mention our killer, is part of a plot originating in China."

"You're joking, chief. And I'm being serious."

Nursing an injured look, Marvin dialed. He was only partway into it when a recorded voice broke from the speaker. "We're sorry. The number you have dialed did not go through. Please make sure—" The chief cut the connection with a jab of his finger. "So much for that idea."

As Marvin sulked, Claudia made another suggestion.

"Maybe you could figure out what the numbers mean by using your new computer." She eyed the machine covetously. "Then the town wouldn't be on your case about buying it. You could prove it was money well spent."

"They're more upset about my seminar than they are about the machine." A three day affair in April, the seminar had been a complete waste of time. Touted as a computer course in crime analysis, it had in fact been something more appropriate to fledgling programmers, most of the lessons whizzing

over Robideau's head like badly aimed darts. Robideau stood up. "I'm going out."

"And I'm going home to bed," said Marvin.

"Why don't you try what they do in the movies?" Claudia asked.

The chief sniffed. "And what's that?"

"Call in a specialist. Get an expert's opinion."

"End of Main is not brimming with experts on number codes."

She ignored him. "In the city they'd consult one of the university professors. Here you could try—I don't know—one of the schoolteachers." She changed the subject suddenly. "Can I use your new computer while you're out?"

"You've got a computer."

"Yes, but this one's better."

"What she means," said Marvin with grinning sarcasm, "is that the screen on this one is bigger and she can enjoy her casino games more."

He ducked as Claudia Webb winged a red file folder at him.

The chief stopped at the scene of last night's fire for a look around in the fullness of daylight. Surveying the ugly, silent remains, he imagined a similar event in the city. There a team of investigators would be combing the ashes, and a small army of constables would be knocking on doors to scare up witnesses. But they had the budget for it. Here you took three days of training and you were accused of singlehandedly wrecking the economy.

Bent like an old man, he went over the area looking for anything

of interest but especially for a matchbook cover. After three sweeps, he hadn't found one. Did it mean that this fire was not associated with the others? Or had the small square of cardboard simply been carried away on a firefighter's boot?

He had a pain in the nape of his neck when he realized that the local businesses would be open by now, and leaving the alley he angled across the street toward Benny's pool hall and diner, hoping to learn what old Sally had been up to yesterday.

In front of the drugstore he almost collided with a chubby buckskin-clad figure barreling out through the automatic doors. Another snooker player, Samantha Oakley, known to some as Annie Oakley because of her dead-eye prowess at the game and to others as Annie Fanny because of her broad backside. Annie would know what Sally had been up to.

But she paled at the sight of Robideau.

"I wasn't doing nothing," she declared peremptorily.

"I never said you were," replied Robideau. "Listen, Annie, if you don't mind I've got some questions ... Annie?"

But perceiving that he was invoking no official power over her, she beetled away, leaving the chief with unanswered questions on his lips. With a dissatisfied grunt, he went into the pool hall.

There were six tables: four eight-footers up front, and two twelve-foot monsters at the back. The chief had never been comfortable at the

big tables; they made him feel as if he were poking a marble across a football field with a toothpick.

There were no snooker players here at the moment. No *real* players. Just some guys who liked to knock the balls around once in a while. Guys like Wilmer Gates and Pete Melynchuk who were at one of the small tables arguing about whose turn it was to put the quarter in the slot to switch the overhead light back on.

"Morning, boys," the chief said with a glance at the lay of the table. The cue ball was pinned nicely behind the pink. "Whose shot?"

"Mine," growled Pete.

"Hooked? Or are you shooting pink?"

"Oh, he's hooked, all right," stated Wilmer Gates with great satisfaction. "That's why he's stalling about puttin' in the money. Gives him time to pout."

"Why don't I just put *all* the money in," snapped Pete. "I'm pretty much doing that already. At least then I'd get the credit for it."

"Fine with me," said Wilmer, bopping the meter with his bony fist as if that might turn the light back on and resolve the argument.

"Did either of you guys see Sally Vittorio in here last night? Maybe talk to him?" The chief eyed both men.

"Yeah, he was here." Pete grudgingly pushed a coin into the meter and twisted the knob. The light flashed on, and he stooped to line up his shot—once long off the end rail in hopes of hitting a lonely red on the rebound. "He told Wilmer he'd spot him a hundred points and

shoot left-handed for a ten dollar bill."

"Did you take his challenge, Wilmer?"

Pete chortled derisively. "Are you kidding? Wilmer wouldn't play Sally for ten dollars if Sally were crippled in his other leg and had two broken arms."

"I didn't see you jumping to take him on," Wilmer said viciously. "Now, shoot, or are you waiting for the light to go off again?"

Lining up his cue with a piratical one-eyed squint, Pete sent the cue ball off the far rail, drawing back for the red. Perfect aim, but it ran out of gas an inch short.

Wilmer sniggered. "Shoulda put more poop on it. That's four for me and I'll take 'em, too." He added four to his tally on the chalkboard.

"Hey!" snapped Pete. "I'm supposed to take those points off my score!"

"Yeah, but this way you got a better chance of winning."

Pete bunched his rugged brow suspiciously. "Is that right, chief?"

The chief refused to be drawn. But he felt sure that neither of these two mathematical giants was leaving coded numbers at crime scenes.

"Sally left about eleven with Annie." Pete chalked his cue, and not for the first time the chief was impressed at how fast these guys picked up on current events as he added, "Too bad about Sal. He shouldn't of sacked out in that place, I guess."

"Is that what happened?"

"What else? Funny it was him, though." Pete flinched as Wilmer

slammed a red into a side pocket. "I mean, considering he had such an interest in those fires."

"Is that a fact?"

"Jeez!" Pete looked ill as Wilmer potted the black for seven more points. "Keep your cheeks together, Wilmer, or your horseshoes'll fall out!" He turned back to Robideau. "He was more than interested. Went gimping off to meet the fire-trucks soon as he heard the sirens." He rolled a steely eye at the chief. "He had a theory about those fires."

Wilmer's cue ball dropped into a corner pocket. "Ha!" barked Pete. "That'll cost you four points, pal."

"Sure. Or you have them and get a higher score for yourself."

Pete looked dangerous. "When I scratched a minute ago, you argued the other way—or did you?" He rubbed his head. "I think you're pullin' something here, Wilmer."

"What theory?" the chief prompted. Pete was focusing on Wilmer, battling confusion. "What theory, Pete?"

"I didn't pay much attention. He had a theory about everything. I was saying the firebug would burn down the pool hall next, and he turns those big poochy eyes on me and says no, the numbers weren't right."

"He told you that?"

"Yeah, and there's another number that ain't right!" Pete strode over to Wilmer, who had just deducted four points from his own score, and snatched the chalk out of his friend's hand. "I think I'd rather add those points to what I already got." Then, realizing that Wilmer's score would go back up

again, he hesitated. "Wait a minute, how can that work?"

The chief left the rancorous pair to their math. They were having as much trouble with numbers as he was. They might all benefit from the views of an expert. What was it Claudia had said? Consult a school-teacher?

In the hallway of Netley High School he motioned to Margaret Chase through the glass of the classroom door. He didn't want to enter. God knew what rumors the students would spread if they saw their teacher being questioned by the police. She made some excuse and came out into the hall, looking worried.

"Is there something wrong, Chief Robideau?"

"No, I just need your help, that's all."

"My help?"

"That's right. They told me at the office that you teach mathematics." He showed her the sheet of paper where he had copied down the groups of ones and sixes. "I think this is some sort of code. I wonder if you have any thoughts on that."

She gazed at his scratchings.

"Only two numerals used. That implies a binary system."

"A binary system?"

"A system of depicting values using only two symbols. We're more familiar with the decimal system, which has ten symbols—zero through nine. But it's possible to express any number with only two. That's how digital computers do it. Though I admit I never saw a system that used ones and sixes be-



fore." She shook her head slowly and handed the paper back. "You need someone more knowledgeable. See David Skozeki. He taught here till he took early retirement. You can get his address from the office."

Robideau had heard of Skozeki. The teacher had come to town a few years ago and became a legend among the students, solving complex problems in his head, rattling off the value of pi to umpteen decimal places. That sort of thing.

He had to drive almost to River-ton to get to Skozeki's house, a trim little bungalow with lots of flowers. A van was parked out front, and there was a lawn mower out front with a red gas can beside it. He found Skozeki in the back yard mixing fertilizer and potting soil, a small man with an intensity that belied his graying hair.

He seemed annoyed at the interruption, but his eyes lit up brightly at the mention of a mathematical puzzle.

"How do you like retirement?" the chief asked conversationally, gazing around at the parklike garden. Nearing retirement himself, it was a question he pondered often.

"Wonderful. Best move I ever made. Reluctant at first. Thirty years in the saddle. But when I lost Jen, I lost interest. Didn't want to be an uninterested teacher. Too many of those already. So I made the break." He rattled the paper. "This looks delicious. What is it?"

"That's just it. I don't know. To me they're just numbers. Strings of ones and sixes."

"Sixes?" Skozeki's eyebrows lift-

ed, and he squinted over the sheet myopically. "Sixes, you say? Well, well. And is there some context you can share with me?"

The chief explained reluctantly that he couldn't say much more about it except that he suspected it was some sort of code.

"Connected with that fire last night, is it? Where the old hobo died? Perhaps connected with *all* those fires we've been having?"

The chief made no response.

"No great feat of deduction, that," explained Skozeki. "Not a lot of crime around here, after all." And realizing he was not going to prod Robideau into a fuller explanation, he set the paper down and bent over it. "This is tough."

"You can't help me then?"

"I didn't say that."

"You want more time?"

"Leave it with me."

The chief nodded. "All right. But I have to ask you not to show it around."

"Certainly. I imagine they gave you my telephone number." There was a slight inflection to his voice as if he resented that fact. "Call me tomorrow."

"Sorry about the cloak and dagger stuff."

"Not at all. But if it is about the fires, you ought to let me in on it. I might have more incentive. My wife died in a fire—but then I guess you knew that."

Robideau didn't, but he nodded and left Skozeki to work out the problem.

As the chief disappeared around the corner of the house, Skozeki

gazed at the paper again. "Sixes and ones? Well, well." A delighted smile played on his lips and his shoulders began to rock with private amusement.

**"H**ow's your stomach lately? Are you cutting back on the coffee?"

Mrs. Robideau set a steaming Styrofoam container in front of him and plunked a spoon down beside it. The chief's nose wrinkled.

"I'm fine. What's this?"

"Soup, of course. What do you think it is?"

"But it's in a cup. A disposable cup."

"Which makes it easier to do the dishes."

The chief poked suspiciously at the steaming contents with his spoon. "Soup comes in a can," he complained in an injured tone. "You heat it in a pan and serve it in a bowl."

"Wasting all kinds of energy and making whacks of dirty dishes."

"How much energy can it take to heat soup?"

"Ergs of it. Kilo-calories. I read that one day's cooking and washing-up in New York City could send the space shuttle to the moon. Here you use the kettle and that's it. Throw the cup away, no cleanup. Taste it."

"The space shuttle doesn't go to the moon. And there *are* dishes. There's a spoon."

"So there's a spoon, big deal. I could rinse spoons for the Russian fleet with the water it takes to wash the pot and the bowl."

"Was that in the magazine too?"

"Taste it!"

The chief tasted it. He liked it.

"It's no hell."

"You'll get used to it." She sat down across from him. "How is it going today?"

"It's going. But those matchbook covers are a puzzle. I need to know what they mean. I saw a Dave Skozeki, retired math teacher. I hope he can give me some insight. He mentioned that his wife—"

"Died in a fire?"

"You knew about it? I didn't."

"That's because you don't take an interest in people—unless you have to go after them."

"I don't *go after* people."

"Well what do you call it then? It's not like you send out an engraved invitation—'Dear criminal, please attend a reception to be held in your honor at the police station.' *That* would fly like a stuffed duck, wouldn't it? You go after people. That's how it works."

"All right, I suppose I do. But you make me sound like a mad dog." He took a short, irritable breath. "Anyway, it doesn't matter as long as he knows his math."

"I expect he knows a one from a six. He wrote a math book, I'm told. Back in his days at the university."

"You mean he was a professor?"

"A lecturer or something. But I heard he could of become a professor if he'd stayed there."

"So why didn't he?"

"Who knows?"

Mrs. Robideau served the tea in china cups, so at least he didn't have to drink it out of a disposable container. It irked him not knowing

things that were considered common knowledge. He said, barely concealing his irritation, "I suppose I don't learn the things you do because I don't hear as much gossip."

"Or pass any on," returned Mrs. Robideau. "It's a give-to-get activity." She was already wiping the plastic tablecloth, forcing him to lift his tea in the air.

"I ask questions."

"It's not the same. People get their backs up."

He changed the subject.

"What about Skozeki's wife? How did that fire happen? I don't remember hearing about it."

"I'm sure you did, but you forgot about it because it didn't happen here, it happened in Riverton. He was away at the time on some sort of a seminar—maybe a computer course." She gave him a needling look. "Anyway, she was in the garage and set it on fire somehow. There was a lot of flammable stuff lying around, the story goes, and when she lit the gas barbecue—poof! That's what Mrs. Rasmussen told me at the Co-op, and she was their neighbor at the time."

She went into the kitchen to rinse the cloth, raising her voice to go on talking. "But you found the right person. If he can't figure it out for you, no one can, all your ones and sixes, or ones and nines."

He perked up.

"What's that?"

"What's what?"

He'd been about to ask why she was dragging in nines but realized that of course the matchbooks would show ones and nines if you held them upside down.

He stood up. "I have to get back."

"You haven't finished your tea."

"I'll have an extra cup at supper. What are we having, by the way?"

"Pot roast."

"You're going to risk soiling a pot?"

"No, as a matter of fact I'm going to cook it in a bag."

"In a bag?" He stared at her, then turned away. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

Claudia Webb was at his computer when he got back to the office. He voiced the thought he'd been entertaining on his way from the house. "I'm more than ever convinced that every time this creep sets a fire he's leaving us a definite clue."

"Why would he do that?"

"To show he's smarter than us."

"He *has* been smarter than us."

"We'll see about that." He stood at his desk looking down at the matchbooks. "The mark is different each time, so it can't be a signature—a Z for Zorro or anything."

"Zorro? Chief, you need a holiday. Anyway, only two of the actual addresses has a one in it, and only one of them has a six."

"Can I have my office back now?"

Graciously she made room for him, saving her work to a diskette. "By the way, a package came from the coroner. Evidence, I suppose." She stopped at the door with a look of pained concentration on her face. "If it's a code, maybe it's Spanish."

"Spanish? Why on earth would it be Spanish?"

"Zorro was Spanish, chief. Everybody knows that."

As she pulled the door shut, grinning, the chief muttered acidly, "He was *not* Spanish! He was Mexican!"

Claudia left for lunch, and a silence settled over the room. Robideau poured himself a coffee, looked at it, then dumped it back into the urn. He sat down and opened the package. Personal effects found on the body. The melted blobs that were the pins Sally had worn like campaign medals. Some loose change—three quarters, two dimes, and a penny. A wallet. A Zip-lock bag containing a few ounces of very dry tobacco. The only thing they hadn't sent Robideau was the man's leg brace, but it wouldn't have fit into the package.

He examined the wallet first. Here too the contents were disappointing—a five dollar bill, another sixty cents in change, and two personal documents: a Social Security card and a driver's license years out of date.

But then, giving the envelope a final shake, he discovered something more interesting. A matchbook cover tumbled out. The attached report stated that it had been found in Sally's right front pocket, ending the notion that Sally had unintentionally interrupted the arsonist at his work. He must have had it with him when he was struck down, or the killer had intentionally planted it on him. Or maybe he and the killer were both responsible for lighting the fires. A gang of two.

The chief scrutinized it carefully. It was half a matchbook cover actually, just the front flap of one torn away from the back and the strik-

er strip. The numerals were faint. He could barely make out the loops and lines: 66116166. Ones and sixes, sixes and ones—or maybe they were nines and ones as Mrs. Robideau had suggested. Mrs. Chase had said it might be some sort of binary system. Now where had he heard that expression before?

The question stirred thoughts at the back of his mind, but the dust would not settle.

They were rather strange looking sixes. Oddly short, oddly fat. He concentrated on one of the easier-to-read groupings.

Then a thought struck him. Never mind nines. Could they be zeros?

The prickling at the back of his mind came to the fore in a rush. He had seen something like this before, albeit through a haze of boredom. He hauled out the workbook from his computer course and opened it clumsily, anxious to see if he were right.

The chapter was entitled "Binary Numbers—Base 2—The Computer Word," and he read, "The digital computer uses ones and zeros. So how does it handle everyday numbers? By converting them into a ones and zeros code group." It was about here that the chief's eyes had glazed over in the stuffy classroom, but now he read on keenly. "From right to left, the first position tells you if you have a one or not. The second if you have a two, the third if you have a four, then an eight, a sixteen, a thirty-two, and so on. A one means you have the number, a zero means you don't. You add up the numbers you have..."

The chief glanced at his sheet. The scrawl on the first matchbook found, as he had first written it, was 11616661.

He changed that to 11010001, and working right to left found he had a one, *no* two, *no* four, and *no* eight. Then a 16, *no* 32, and finally a 64 and a 128.

The sum of these was 209.

And the address of the next building to burn was 209 Beech Street!

He thumped the desk with satisfaction.

Confidently he converted the next group and the next, smiling more broadly as each proved to be the numerical portion of the address of the next place to burn. Converting the last group on his list gave him the address of the building where Sally had died.

Now, tense with anticipation, he inspected the cover that had come in today. Though it was torn, badly smudged, and difficult to read—the “sixes” had scarcely no tails at all—he oriented it like the others, factory edge at the top. The numeric was 00110100 or 52. But 52 what? With no street indicated, the arsonist wasn’t giving the show away.

But all the fires had been near the center of town. He would visit every building numbered 52 in the area and look for a suitable target.

He found a strip mall bakery, a parking lot, a power substation, and four houses, none of which had an outbuilding of any sort associated with it. He pulled the car over to the curb and gazed in mild won-

der at the final address he had found, 52 Lavender Road.

The fire station.

It was a yellow brick edifice with three vehicle bays and an old lookout tower dating back to the twenties, the entire building shaded by elms. It couldn’t be right. It broke the established pattern. At the rear he discovered no sheds, only a large parking pad where the trucks were hosed down.

Inside Fire Chief Barnes was brushing his teeth at a corner washstand. He nodded to Robideau, rinsed his mouth, spat, and put his toothbrush away. “Brush ‘em or lose ‘em,” he explained. He showed his polished incisors in a predatory white glint. “What can I do for you? Have you caught Sparky yet?”

Briefly Robideau explained his presence by saying that he had received a tip.

“So what are you telling me? That this creep is planning to burn down my fire hall?” Barnes’s eyebrows formed a fierce, defiant arch.

“No, I’m not saying that. But I have to check. Has the station received any other threats in the last six or eight months?”

Barnes frowned. “Don’t be ridiculous. We aren’t the police. People *like* us.”

It was hard to imagine anyone having a grievance against the fire department, Robideau had to admit.

“What about some bitter employee. Have you sacked anyone lately?”

“Well, I did lay a guy off when this year’s tight budget came out.”



"Why him in particular?"

"I probably would have let him go anyway. He had an attitude. Didn't fit in. I heard he took some retraining. Computers, I think."

Robideau had been edging toward the door. He stopped at that and got his notebook out. "Who is this guy?"

Steven Underhill was a square-built, clean-shaven young man in a blue sweatshirt that had FIRE-FIGHTERS ARE HOT STUFF embroidered on it. He received Robideau into his apartment with reluctant enthusiasm as if he liked visitors but not this one. The place was cramped. There were mechanic's tools strewn about, and a computer on a dinette table.

He smiled sardonically. "Parking infraction, chief?"

Robideau explained that it wasn't a parking infraction that had brought him here but a general inquiry into some unsolved crimes—the arsons.

"So why ask me? All that started after I left the department."

The chief's gaze took in the room. The entrails of a motorcycle lay on the floor; the frame of the machine propped against one wall. Underhill was evidently not averse to using his apartment as a machine shop.

"Is that gasoline?" The chief eyed an olive-drab can tucked under the table.

Underhill shrugged. "It's safe enough. That's an approved container."

"Yes. But stored indoors?"

"Where else am I going to keep it?" This was obviously one young man who had not taken his fire-fighting basics too seriously. "You're not trying to make some connection between my gas can and those fires, are you?"

Robideau shrugged. "You have the materials—"

"So do lots of folks!"

"—and the know-how."

"Anyone can light a match. Besides, if I had something against the department, I'd be more likely to burn the station down."

"Exactly what I was thinking," muttered the chief. He nodded at the computer. "I heard you took a course in repairing those things. Did it get you a job?"

"Yes. Now I'd like you to go."

Robideau took his leave with formal politeness, and the door slammed at his back. He drove thoughtfully toward home, trying the role of arsonist on Steven Underhill. A bitter ex-employee lashing out at authority? It was a mediocre fit.

Robideau suddenly remembered that he needed to call Skozeki and tell him he had cracked the code. Most likely the math expert had done so himself within minutes of Robideau's visit. He fished Skozeki's number out and dialed him on his cell. The teacher picked up with a guarded tone, then erupted into a burst of friendliness at hearing Robideau's voice.

"It's you, chief. Listen, before you ask, no I haven't got an answer yet. Spent several hours on it last night—worked right through my favorite TV shows—but it stumped me.

I'm wondering if maybe there's no code at all, if the numbers were simply meant to confuse you . . ."

Robideau held back. He told Skozeki to keep at it, rang off, and drove the rest of the way home deeply puzzled. A math whiz who specialized in number systems unable to make the connection that Mrs. Chase had spotted so quickly, never mind the solution that had sprung into Robideau's math-challenged mind?

How could that be?

Mrs. Robideau met him at the door with an alert look and a meaningful tilt of her head at the living room. "We got company."

The chief shrugged out of his coat. Tired, hungry, he didn't want company.

"Who is it?"

"It's that pool-playing lady, Samantha Oakley." Seeing the chief's expression flicker from displeasure to one that was all business, she added, "Now don't you bully her. She came of her own free will."

But Ms. Oakley wasn't in the living room. From the back of the house came the rush of the plumbing. "She's in the lady's," Mrs. Robideau explained unnecessarily.

When she did appear, a short, large woman in a buckskin jacket with stains on it that the chief didn't want to speculate on, the first question that came to mind was why she had rushed away from him the day after the fire. But he managed a smile.

"Hello, Annie. You wanted to see me?"

"I didn't really *want* to. But I

thought about it and knew that I ought to. An' I can't be seen at your office."

It was a commonly held notion along the street that if you visited the station without restraints on your wrists you were almost certainly an informer.

"I'm glad you came. I have a few questions for you, Annie."

"Go ahead, then. Shoot."

She might have been prompting him at a snooker table.

She had slowly settled on the edge of the sofa, a bulging string bag on the floor at her feet. The chief, realizing he was towering over her, backed off toward the window to stand among the greenery of Mrs. Robideau's potted plants.

"I need to know about the night Sally died, Annie. People say he was with you."

The room was cast in somber grays as the sun settled behind the rooftops. The burglar lamp over the piano switched itself on with a crisp click, suddenly revealing her reflection in the window glass. She looked haggard, her eyes like two pools of lost hope. Mrs. Robideau bustled in with a tray bearing hot tea, cups and saucers, and a generous mound of cookies. Annie took two of the cookies and tucked them carefully into her pocket. She launched into a eulogy of sorts.

"Sally knew things. He was sharp. He read the newspapers when people was through with them, made it his business to know what went on in the streets." She pocketed another cookie. "He was studying that fire-o-maniac stuff going on, and he says to me, 'Sam,'

he says, 'this is no good. It's a crime against everybody. It's sick, girl, plain sick.'" She breathed out a sigh that became a hacking cough, recovered, and took some tea. "We was together that day. You want details?"

"If you don't mind."

She sniffed.

"I run into him outside the Netley. He'd been in the lobby, pulling weeds—"

"Pulling weeds?"

"Fishin' butts outa ashtrays. He offered me a smoke. He made good smokes, carried papers and rolled his own with what he got from the butts. He rolls one, pinches it in half, and we light up. 'Annie,' he says, 'how about a trip this winter. You and me off to someplace warm.' I laughed. He was always a kiddier. But he says he ain't kiddin', an' how does Mexico sound?"

"I ask did he inherit from an uncle or somethin', an' he says no, but one dollar's good as another. He says he can't explain it but there's money comin' his way an' he'll need someone to help spend it an' I'm elected. I says he can elect me to spend money anytime though it seemed to me they got a different kind of money down in Mexico."

She paused as if to reflect on the problems of international currency, and the chief had to get her going again. "You took him seriously?"

"Well, no, not at first." And she added, with a disparaging look at the teapot, "Have you got anything to drink?" The chief opened the liquor cabinet, and with a glass of sherry in her hand she gained new strength.

"But then I *start* taking him seriously. There's somethin' about him. He's not his usual self."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning he's even more cheerful and chipper than usual. An' he wants to walk. Stroll around a bit. That wasn't his way. He hated to walk, what with that brace on his leg. The bear trap, he called it, like it was somethin' that had glommed onto him an' he was waitin' to have it removed—"

"Where exactly did you walk?"

"Around the block. Over and over again. Down Burton Street, turn at the corner, stroll back up the alley behind the beauty shop."

The chief's eyes narrowed as he pictured the route. It would have taken them repeatedly past the burnt-out shed. Had Sally known the arsonist's plans? Had he figured out where the firebug would strike next and then attempted a little blackmail?

"Sally said nothing about where he expected the money to come from?"

"Nothing."

"Did he mention that he was going to meet with somebody?"

She took a large gulp of sherry and stared right through the chief, focusing on something unpleasant. "He never said so. But he did. When we left the pool hall that night, I was curious and followed him. I watched him from the end of the alley." She was silent, overcome by her thoughts.

"Did he go straight up to the door?"

"Actually, no. He looked around at the ground for a minute under

the streetlamp, picked up something, and put it in his pocket.

Thinking of the latest matchbook cover, Robideau nodded.

"Annie, what else did you see?"

"I think *he* saw *me*."

"Who saw you? Sally?"

"No. The other man. Sally went to that shed and banged on the door. A man opened up to him, an' when he looked out, I think he saw me."

The chief tried to get a description, but Annie couldn't help him. It had been a good distance, the only light the orange glow of the streetlamp. She did remember a vehicle parked in the alley but couldn't provide details.

"I'd probably know it if I saw it again, though."

The chief was frustrated. He was getting nowhere.

"I know what you're thinkin'." She wore a look of self-loathing. "I should of seen the whole thing comin' an' protected him somehow."

"You couldn't have seen it coming, Annie. No one could." Her glass was empty. He refilled it.

"I'm gonna miss him. He was stayin' with me—crowded, I only got one room—but he'd spread his bedroll on the floor, an' when he scored at snooker or cashed a disability check, he'd kick in for grub. We managed."

The chief pricked up his ears, hearing that Sally had left some possessions behind. "I want that bedroll, Annie."

"I knew you would. I gathered up all his stuff an' brought it with me."

"It's out back on the patio," Mrs.

Robideau said reassuringly from the doorway, looking in to see how the cookies were holding out. Thank God, the chief thought. Sally's bedroll was the last thing he wanted under his roof, what with the cost and inconvenience of fumigation. "I'll take it to the station in the morning and have a look at it there."

"While you're at it, take a peek in his diary," Annie advised.

"He kept a diary, a journal?"

"Not that he wrote in every day, but when he had reason to set something down, he did it." She put down her empty glass. "Can I go now?"

She paused at the door. "Sally was sharp. He could of been anything he wanted—but he didn't want. Some people don't, you know. They just like to be left alone. Sally's been like that since he left the university all those years ago after his leg got injured."

Sally in university? This was news. "*How* did it get injured?"

"A bunch of roughnecks beat him up. He never talked about it much"

As she went out the door, Mrs. Robideau thrust a plastic bag into her hand—filled with cookies. The woman looked both ways at the gate as if she thought she might be under surveillance, gave her string bag a hike, then headed downtown. The chief went into the washroom then joined Mrs. Robideau at the window.

"Next time chain her to the table leg or something. She cleaned out every pill and capsule in the medicine cabinet."

"No," said Mrs. Robideau.

"Yes!"

"Poor dear," breathed Mrs. Robideau. "It tears your heart out."

**A**t the office next morning Chief Robideau took the shock-orange colored garbage bag containing Salvatore Vittorio's worldly goods down into the basement inspection room and dumped everything that was in it onto the large zinc-covered table.

There wasn't much. Sleeping bag, spare shirt and trousers, knitted slippers with the soles worn through. A few pathetic objects like a pencil stub with a rubber band tied around it, a tiny bottle of sinus tablets, a cube of the blue chalk used on the tips of pool cues. There was also a rolled up bachelor's degree from the University of Manitoba—and Sally's "diary."

It was a thick old Day-Timer, years out of date, with every used page having it's preprinted header scratched out and the appropriate date written in above. The chief turned immediately to the final entry.

His eyes opened a little wider. Squeezed in at the bottom were these gleeful words: "The Lord hath delivered him into my hands!"

Heading back upstairs with the degree and the book in his hands, the chief sat down at his desk and began to read. A lot of the diary was glory-wall stuff. Names of people Sally had trounced at snooker (disdainfully referred to as fish) and an impressive recall, if accurate, of opponents' names, the table used, and even the order in which the

balls went into the pockets. Trivia. But an entry dated eight weeks earlier stood out from the dross. Even the pencil scratches conveyed excitement.

"Skuzzy. I saw him leave the place!"

The date was one day after the fire behind Loudon's carpentry shop.

The chief thumbed the pages diligently but found no suggestion as to who "Skuzzy" might be. But there was this note a few pages later: "Pinto says j. cans in the back of Skuzzy's van."

This was better. This could be verified. Pinto was a well-known street person, a young man who darted out uninvited at traffic lights to squeegee car windows, hoping for a dollar or two. "J. cans" must mean jerry cans.

The next meaningful entry was "Skuzzy won't talk. Keeping an eye out for him." Mundane entries were forgotten after that. There were no further remarks until six days later when Sally wrote, "Skuzzy leaves notes in binary!"

Sally had been following the arsonist, had seen him leave the notes, had even read them and put them back again. More than that, he had known what he was looking at, had distinguished the zeros from ones immediately! Was it a handwriting that he was familiar with?

And finally, "Meeting arranged."

The chief sat back and pinched the bridge of his nose. Sally had indeed stumbled onto the arsonist. But long before he lost his life, Sally recognized him and probably at-

tempted to blackmail him. But this wasn't snooker. He had underestimated this fish.

So who was Skuzzy? Was it David Skozeki? If so, Skozeki's lack of success at breaking the code made some sense. He didn't want to provide an answer.

Robideau dialed the school. The principal—Ms. Rifkin—was curt when she came on the line, but she answered his questions. Where had Skozeki taught before he arrived in End of Main? She rattled off a string of schools, which the chief jotted down. Hadn't the school been at all curious about why he'd changed jobs so much? A little, but they were happy to have him.

Then the chief popped his big question.

"Does he have any other names that you're aware of. Any nicknames?"

"I'm sure the students have names for all of us."

"I don't mean that. I mean something his peers might have called him."

She seemed to reconsider. "Well, it may be off base, but I did take a call one day—it was lunch hour, our secretary was out, and this call came in..."

"Go on."

"It was a rough, scratchy voice, a man's voice, and all it said was—I may not have the words *exactly* right—"

"I'm listening."

"Yes, well, the caller claimed to have a message for Skuzzy. The name meant nothing to me. I thought it was in reference to a student. He said, 'Tell Skuzzy you-

know—who needs to meet with him if he doesn't want his world to go up in smoke.' And then the party hung up. Mr. Skozeki came into the office just then—he would drop by for visits—and I told him what had just happened and he turned very pale and walked out as if he had forgotten why he'd come there in the first place." She seemed surprised at herself. "It did cross my mind that he might be the individual the caller was referring to, but I just got on with my work. I had sort of forgotten about it till now."

The chief sat for awhile over the matchbook covers. He would be seeing the damned things in his sleep. He lined them up in front of him, left to right, his gaze drawn to the most recent one, the torn one. If the arsonist were Skozeki, why would the man want to burn down the fire hall? He had reason *not* to burn it. What was a fire to an arsonist without the frantic rush of trucks and firefighters?

He couldn't have interpreted the code correctly.

He picked up the torn cover again. The markings were so faint they were barely legible. The arsonist's habit had apparently been to hold the matchbook with the striker-strip in his left palm, and write on the inside of the open flap, the factory edge at the top. But what if this time the arsonist were more nervous than usual, holding it the other way round? In fact, the looping characters did look more like nines than sixes.

He heard Mrs. Robideau's words again: "...ones and sixes, ones and nines..."



The chief rotated the torn cover so that the ragged edge was uppermost. Now the code read 00101100.

He quickly did the conversion. The result was 64, the number of the roominghouse where Sally had stayed with Annie. Annie lived there still. With a feeling of foreboding the chief got up quickly and headed for the door.

**F**ire was one thing, human life another. Human life had the element of character, and character could be graded from low to medium to high, and sometimes, though rarely, even very high, extremely high, character with a perfect grade point average. Jen's had been like that—a more hardworking woman never lived—and if she could die so horribly, one had to wonder why so many useless people were still walking around taking up space. Life was an assignment. You were expected to work at it. And people who contributed nothing to it were just doodling. What else could you call it?

He brought the van to a full stop at the intersection, front bumper precisely at the painted line. There was no traffic, no other car in sight. He drove on.

Of course nobody was perfect. Everyone had a weakness. He had known men whose weakness was philandering or drink, compulsive gambling or excessive vanity. He himself had a weakness for fires, but what of that? Life was algebraic, you watched for the plusses and minus signs. If you transgressed a little while living a full and produc-

tive life in every other respect, you were still miles ahead of most people. People like Salvatore Vittorio and that dreadful virago of his.

He pursed his lips as sirens and roaring engines screamed past. A pumper and a ladder truck speeding to an alarm. As always, he felt a proprietary jealousy, but there were bound to be other fires.

He stopped a half block away from 64 Water Street. It was better not to park too close. From this distance he could see the front gate of the place, a sad sagging framework of broken pickets and blistered paint. He would sit here and wait until the woman appeared. There would be no mistaking her stocky buckskin-clad figure plodding homeward along the street.

He unlocked the passenger door. He would entice her into the van—using force if necessary—then drive out into the marshes to a lonely spot he had in mind. He wouldn't make the mistake he had made with the old man. This time there would be nothing left behind except ashes.

He set his hand on the brown paper grocery bag that stood beside him between the seats, gave it a nudge, and heard the reassuring gurgle of the gasoline can inside.

Yet a pang of guilt thrust at him. It had never been his intent to harm people. There was always that risk of course, but he hadn't sought it. Still, he had a right to protect himself. These people had asked for it. Started in on him. First Vittorio (a wonderful scapegoat years ago when the campus police were out for blood—who could have

foreseen when he was set free for lack of evidence that a group of outraged students would administer justice of their own?), emerging after all this time with his sneering threats. And now his woman with her implicit one.

He set his jaw, coldly reminding himself how worthless and unproductive such people were, and thought about sweet, foolish Jen, who would be with him still if she hadn't mucked about the garage in his absence, against his express orders ...

The woman appeared. But she was approaching from the wrong direction. He saw her in his right-hand mirror, coming up the sidewalk behind him. It was unnerving to have misjudged things right off the hop, but so far so good. She seemed tired, heavy-shouldered. On her present course she would walk right past him. Then she would turn in at her gate and enter the house.

But that didn't happen.

Instead things went suddenly wrong.

She spotted the van. It seemed impossible she'd recognize a vehicle she had only glimpsed once in a darkened alley, but she seemed to do a double-take at the sight of it, dropped the string bag she was carrying, and came striding straight for him.

Her aggressiveness threw him. He lost his nerve. Panicked. He shot a hand out for the ignition switch but found no key there, dug desperately in his pockets, and finally rattled them out only to drop them between his feet. He groped for

them blindly, the blood roaring in his ears, losing several more seconds trying to force the wrong key into the ignition switch. When he got the right one between his fingers, he had run out of time. She was at the passenger door hauling it open with the glare of an angry tigress on her face.

"You're Skuzzy, ain't you? An' you killed my Sal!" She was jabbing her grubby finger at him and bellowing loud enough to be heard on Burton Street. Instinctively he grabbed her arm and, with a jerk, dragged her into the van. He had to shut her up. He began to force her into the back compartment, between the bucket seats, but she was a handful, rearing backwards, knocking the mirror askew. He spun the seat around, got both hands on her and dumped her into the back, then hauled the passenger door shut and dived after her to prevent her escaping out the rear.

She seemed very large and frightening, squatting there on the floor, panting through a mouthful of sharp yellow teeth. But she respected him now, measuring him with quick little blinks of her eyes.

"You killed Sally!"

"No." He was gasping for breath himself. "He killed himself. He should have minded his own beeswax."

"Sally told me about you. He said you were sick. Sick a long time ago at the university." Her face twisted in a hideous sneer. "He told me about the fires back then. How someone fingered him for it. He said it was you."

"He smoked dope. He didn't

know what day it was half the time. People—the authorities—were anxious to charge somebody, and there he was, already a loser. I had a chance to make something of myself. An achiever, I got things done.”

“You got things done all right. You got him arrested, expelled, beaten up, and practically killed!”

“He would have dropped out anyway. And I couldn’t have known those hoodlums would attack him, never mind leave him crippled.”

“But you didn’t lose any sleep over it, did you? An’ now you’ve finished the job. You’ve killed him!”

“In self-defense.”

“Yeah, sure. And did you kill your wife in self-defense, too?”

This was intolerable. It was like a steel blade thrust into his soul. He went cold with rage, fists clenched to strike.

“I did *not* kill Jen! That was an accident!”

“An accident that wouldn’t of happened if your garage wasn’t swimming in fuel oil and gasoline.”

Her words were hot embers being thrust at him, showered upon him. Hurtful words. He suddenly wanted her to suffer a terrible pain.

“Do you know what this is?” He rattled the grocery bag out, tearing the paper away, wanting her to see its contents and be terrified. He pushed the jerry can under her nose and spun the lid off. “You know gasoline when you smell it? Well, maybe you’d like to do more than smell it. Maybe you’d like to—*experience* it!”

She lashed out and knocked the can over. Gasoline began to slosh from its open spout, spreading in a

dark stain across the carpet, filling the van with fumes. He had to get out. He fumbled behind him for the cargo door handle.

Robideau jumped from his car at Annie’s gate, but he stopped in his tracks before he reached it. Something lay on the sidewalk a little farther up the street, something that looked like Annie’s string bag, the contents spilling out of it. He glanced back toward Burton Street. Nothing suspicious there. Only the elms glittering in the sunshine, a boy dragging his bike into his yard.

The chief looked back at the bag. There the street was even quieter. Not a soul in sight. Just empty yards and porches and a van parked at the curb. Then he heard a muffled scream, a man’s scream.

“I’ll teach you!” Annie shrieked, gripping Skozeki by his hair and slamming his head into the gas-soaked floor. I’ll teach you to treat people like snooker balls. “*You!*” she hollered, “into the side pocket!,” and she boomeranged his head off the seatback. “And *you* into the corner pocket!,” bouncing it off the floor. She was immensely strong. He could hear himself screaming.

Then the punishment stopped. She had let him go. She dragged the cargo door open and was bailing out. Eyes smarting from the gasoline, he crawled to the driver’s seat and pulled himself in behind the wheel.

The chief saw Annie tumble out of the van and land on her rump. Then she was up on her feet and

pounding heavily toward him. There was something spilled on her, wet all down one side of her clothes. Only when she reached him and he put his arms around her did he catch the scent of gasoline.

At that moment the van roared to life, lurched, and made a clumsy U-turn in the street, bumbling drunkenly up the curbstone and down again. It straightened out, began to pick up speed, and then, to Robideau's horror, exploded. There was a blinding orange flash, a *whump!* like a mortar, and the van jumped the curb again and smashed into a tree. Within seconds it was boiling with flame and sending billows of black smoke into the clear afternoon sky.

The chief was explaining matters to himself as much as to Mrs. Robideau.

"We have a guy who lights fires, who's been doing it all his life. He's very cocky about it. Lately he even leaves clues behind. Then he's confronted by someone from his past who threatens to connect him with a lot of ugly old rumors."

"Salvatore."

"That's right. His first thought is to throw a scare into Sally. He knows that Sally, no slouch at math himself, has figured out his little code, so he prepares a matchbook especially for Sally, a note with Sally's own address encoded on it."

"Sort of an 'I know where you live' kind of threat."

"Exactly. He plans to present this to Sally in some dramatic way at their meeting but has a change of

heart when he sees how tough-minded Sally is. He loses his temper and takes a whack at Sally with a piece of wood. He then torches the building. But in his rage he forgets about Annie. He doesn't think about her until later—"

"She could have told you what she knew the very next morning, when you saw her at the drugstore."

"Yes, but she was confused and upset. It wasn't till she calmed down that she got up the courage to come and talk to me."

Mrs. Robideau held a carving knife out to him and pointed at the roast. It was still in the pot. In a filmy bag. The chief studied it, perplexed.

"How do I get at it?"

"Cut the bag open, you goose. But carefully. If the sauce leaks I'll have the pan to wash."

Like a surgeon opening up a patient, the chief made a cautious incision in the top of the bag. Steam and the delicious aroma of roast beef burst forth.

"If you want my opinion," said Mrs. Robideau, setting out some paper plates, "someone should of figured that jaboney out long before this. How many schools did he teach at?"

"Quite a number."

"A number of communities all with fire problems and nobody guessed a thing until he came here? Listen, you didn't do so bad."

She nudged him aside, cut off a small piece of meat, and put it in his mouth. "What do you think? And if you say it's no hell, I'll throw it at you!"

"Actually," the chief replied, chewing slowly, "it's terrific."

"Now you're being sarcastic."

"I'm not being sarcastic."

"I can tell when you're being sarcastic."

"I'm *not* being sarcastic. It's really good."

"You're being sarcastic," she said determinedly, but he could see she was pleased. "Now about that number code. What was that all about?"

"Well, I think that after his wife died he had to salvage his ego. Reaffirm his high opinion of himself by proving he was smarter than the dimwits around him."

"You're referring to yourself, you realize."

"I do realize it, the poor guy. I ought to have saved him."

Mrs. Robideau wasn't buying it.

"He caused his wife's death, murdered Sally, and was fixing to kill poor Annie. And from what I heard that van was roaring like a roman candle. Put your head into a thing like that and where would you be? On cloud nine, that's where, with a harp in your hand and your night-shirt flapping."

"I don't think you mean cloud nine."

"Cloud one-one-zero then, or whatever. The fool had only himself to blame. You know what they say about playing with matches."

"Yes."

"And living by the sword."

"Yes, yes, I know."

"And how pride goeth before a fall. Now, let's eat. And no complaints. Bag or no bag, I'm still the best cook around."

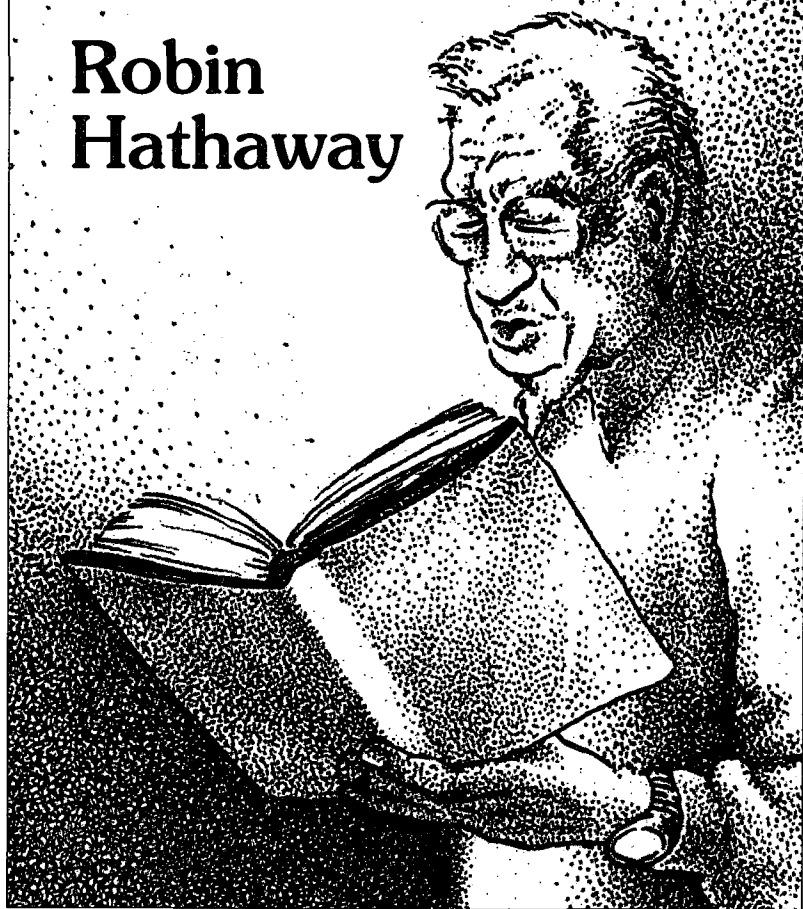
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FICTION

# The Doctor Murders a Dead Man

Robin  
Hathaway



*Illustration by M. Bilokur*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1/02*

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**D**r. Fenimore was in his inner office, finishing up after a long afternoon of seeing patients, when Mrs. Doyle, his nurse, came to the door. He glanced up from a urine sample he was labeling.

"There's one more," she said, apologetically. "Mr. Ingersoll."

"Did he have an appointment?"

"No. Said he was in the neighborhood, and . . ."

Fenimore sighed. "Send him in."

Mr. Ingersoll was a banker. A lean wisp of a man, with a perennial stoop that made him look older than his fifty-one years. Fenimore had known George and his wife Ida socially, before they had become his patients. They were a subdued, introverted couple unless you got them going on their individual passions. George on Standard & Poor. Ida on nineteenth century British authors. Then they became quite animated.

"Sorry to barge in like this," Ingersoll said.

"That's quite all right, George. Have a seat." Fenimore waved him to the chair on the other side of his desk. "What's the problem?"

"Nothing physical," he said quickly. "But, I didn't know where to turn. We don't go to church any more," he sighed. "And I hate shrinks. I thought maybe . . ."

"Better start at the beginning." Fenimore leaned forward, adopting his most attentive, sympathetic expression.

"It's Ida. She's been acting strange lately."

"In what way?"

"You know what a great reader she is."

Fenimore nodded. Ida taught Nineteenth Century British Literature at Bryn Mawr College. Their home was lined with floor-to-ceiling bookcases, but there were never enough shelves to hold all the books. They spilled out onto the floor, over chairs, coffee tables, and windowsills. This was appealing to Fenimore, but he could see how it might annoy a non-bookish type like George. Fenimore had heard Ida expound on her favorite British authors at length during various dinner and cocktail parties. He happened to find her soliloquies fascinating. But not everyone did.

"You know about her Rogues Gallery?"

"Hmm?"

"She has this collection of portraits of her favorite authors."

Fenimore's eyes widened.

"Oh, nothing fancy. Just postcards. There's the jowly one . . ."

James, thought Fenimore.

"And the one with the whiskers . . ."

Trollope.

"And a couple of others—a rugged, handsome type . . ."

Conrad, or possibly Hardy.

"And the army man. Stiff as a poker."

Kipling. "All men?"

Ingersoll looked startled. "Yes, now that you mention it."

"Go on."

"Well, through the years she used to tack them up over her desk. But recently I noticed that all the old favorites were gone. They've been replaced by a bunch of pictures of just one fellow." He paused.

"Who is it?"

"I don't know. Long hair, mustache, Bohemian type. Reminds me of those kids in the sixties." He repressed a shudder. "But one picture had his initials under it: R.L.S."

"Ah . . ."

"You know him?"

"Of course. Robert Louis Stevenson. One of my favorites." Fenimore thought of his youth and of how he would escape to his room to read *Kidnapped* or *Treasure Island* when he was supposed to be doing his homework. George's interests did not lean toward literature. "Perhaps Ida is writing a paper on him," Fenimore suggested.

"Never mentioned it."

"Why don't you ask her?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "I wouldn't give this a second thought, Fenimore, if it weren't for her other odd behavior."

Fenimore intensified his listening expression.

"Half the time she seems in a daze. I have to speak to her twice or three times before she notices me, and then it's as if she's never seen me before. It's damned unnerving."

Fenimore made a notation on a pad. "Possible hearing disorder."

"And she's lost her appetite. Picks at her food. I always have to urge her to finish. And you know she was always a hearty eater."

Fenimore did know. He used to watch Ida shoveling in the hors d'oeuvres and desserts at parties and worry about her cholesterol. "Has she lost weight?"

Ingersoll nodded.

This could be serious, Fenimore thought. "How long has this been going on?"

Ingersoll frowned. "About three months. Yes, it was July when she pulled down those pictures."

"Why don't you send her in to me for a checkup?"

"I would . . ." He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. "But as I told you, I don't think it's physical."

"What, then?"

He opened his eyes. "I think she's in love."

Fenimore blinked. The idea of a fiftyish introverted English professor in love took him aback.

Ingersoll suddenly looked embarrassed.

What was the man going to ask for next? Viagra?

"I wondered if you might come to dinner," he said unexpectedly. "And just, well, observe her."

Fenimore considered. He prided himself on the fact that he still made house calls, but . . . this was a little irregular.

You could call it a social evening if you like." Ingersoll sensed his dilemma. "I'd pay you, of course," he added hastily.

"Oh, that." It was Fenimore's turn to be embarrassed. "Of course I'll come. When do you want me?"

Ingersoll smiled with relief. "I'll have Ida call you. Then she won't suspect anything." He rose.

"Very well." Rising, too, Fenimore held out his hand. "Don't worry, George, we'll get to the bottom of this."

That night Fenimore decided to renew his acquaintance with R.L.S. He began at the beginning—with *A Child's Garden of Verses*. "I had a little shadow that went in and out with me/What could be the use of him was more than I could see," then moved on to *Treasure Island*. "Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of rum!" And finally to *Travels With a Donkey*. It was in the frontispiece of the latter that he found the author's picture. Still a young man, his hair was long and wavy, and his sensitive mouth decorated with the soft brush of a mustache. But it was his eyes that held you. His gaze reached off the page and embraced you with its kindness. If Fenimore had been a woman, or less heterosexual, he could see how you could fall for this man. He browsed through *Travels* until he came to the end and the Epilogue. It was here that Stevenson's death and funeral were described in detail by his stepdaughter Belle. It seems he had spent a happy, productive morning at his home in Samoa, working on his novel *Weir of Hermiston*. Afterward he had gone into the kitchen to help his wife Fanny make a salad. Suddenly he had cried out, collapsed, and never regained consciousness. He'd fought tuberculosis most of his life; it had finally conquered him. (Probably an embolism, thought Fenimore automatically.)

Members of Stevenson's family and his devoted Samoan servants quietly gathered around him. Other natives from all over the island, even the chiefs, came to his home to be near him and watch over him until he died. Afterward they cut a road through thick jungle to the top of Mount Vaea, his favorite mountain, and dug his grave. It took forty men and three days to accomplish this feat. Then they carried him up the mountain and buried him under the sky. Finally they engraved his epitaph in stone, the one he had written for himself when he was still a boy:

"Here he lies where he longed to be;  
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,  
And the hunter home from the hill."

As Fenimore closed the book, he was surprised to find that his eyes were moist.

“Nice of you to come, Fenimore,” Ingersoll said, greeting him at the front door.

Fenimore set down his briefcase, the one that held his instruments, in the hall and followed his host into the small living room. Actually, the living room wasn't that small, but it was so crowded with books that it seemed so.

“Andrew . . .” Ida joined them quietly from the kitchen.

They drank wine, nibbled cheese and olives, and discussed the day's news, their mutual acquaintances, and the weather. It wasn't until they were at dinner that the conversation began to lag. Fenimore had asked Ida a question about her teaching. She had been staring out the window behind him, and didn't answer.

“Ida?” her husband prompted her.

“Oh,” she said and shook her head gently. “Sorry, Andrew. You were saying?”

“I was just wondering if you had noticed any renewed interest in nineteenth century lit among your students?”

She pressed her lips together. “Not really. Each class seems to have about the same amount of uninterest.”

“That must be frustrating.”

“It used to be. But over the years I've come not to care very much.” With a sad smile she concentrated on moving a small potato from one side of her plate to the other.

George caught Fenimore's eye and shrugged, conveying the thought, see what I mean? Then he filled the awkward pause with a rundown on the Dow Jones and an explanation of why the present bear market was nothing to worry about.

Over coffee Fenimore said to Ida, “George tells me you have quite a collection of authors' portraits. I wonder if you'd share it with me?”

She looked up from pouring milk into her cup.

“Your portrait collection of famous authors,” Fenimore repeated. “I wondered if I might see it?”

She flushed. “Oh,” she murmured. “I don't have so many now.”

When they returned to the living room Fenimore excused himself and went into the hall. He came back with a nicely wrapped package and handed it to Ida. “A little hostess present,” he said.

“Oh, you shouldn't . . .” She carefully unwrapped it, revealing a book.

“Coals to Newcastle,” Fenimore said, “but I thought . . .” He sat down again.

“Oh, Andrew . . .” She had read the title. Now she began leafing through it, not casually but tenderly as if each page were breakable. There was a lengthy pause as her gaze lingered on the frontispiece portrait. Recalling herself, she laid it aside and looked at Fenimore. “You couldn't have brought me anything . . .”

“Well,” blustered George, “how 'bout a hand of bridge?”

"In a minute, George." Fenimore reached for the book he had just given Ida. Flipping briskly to the back, he held it well under the lamp near his chair and prepared to read aloud. "Do you mind?" He glanced at his hosts.

"Oh no," Ida said.

George, noncommittal, smothered a yawn.

Fenimore began to read. He read about Stevenson's last morning at home with his family; the scene in the kitchen describing the author's sudden collapse. Ignoring Ida's soft moan he continued to read about the arrival of the Samoans, the preparations for the burial, the description of the funeral, ending with the epitaph. As he closed the book, Ida rose abruptly and left the room. "Oh," Fenimore said and looked at George, "is something wrong?"

George stared after his wife.

Shortly afterward, Fenimore rose to leave. George made feeble noises about finding Ida, but Fenimore cut him off. "Please don't. She needs her rest."

At the door Fenimore turned. "A word of advice, George." He looked at him for a long minute. "You might try to take more interest in literature."

The banker stared after the doctor with a puzzled frown.

As Fenimore made his way to his car, he thought, Now I know exactly how a murderer feels.

Fenimore didn't see or hear from the Ingersolls for several weeks. One day he bumped into George on Walnut Street. He was coming out of Nicholson's Books with a bag in his hand.

"Say there, Fenimore, I've been meaning to call you."

After they'd exchanged pleasantries, Fenimore asked, "How is Ida?"

"Fine, fine. You certainly worked a miracle. Although I had my doubts after you left. She was much worse for a few days. Stuck to her room. Wouldn't come out. And when she did come out, she looked like the wrath . . . red eyes as if she'd been weeping. I almost called you. But after that her appetite picked up. That dazed look disappeared. And it wasn't long before she was her old self. You certainly found the cure."

"And you?"

"I'm fine. Great. Following your advice, actually. Look here." From his bag he drew a shabby edition of *Early Poems* by Edna St. Vincent Millay. "Has quite a way with words. A bit on the sad side. But take a look at this." He flipped to the back, revealing the photo on the inside cover. Edna in all her dewy flapper freshness. "Quite a looker, don't you think?" He closed the book and returned it gently to the bag. "We'll have to get together soon," he said. As he strode off, Fenimore was struck by the banker's jaunty pace. Even his posture had improved. The perennial slump had almost disappeared.

Fenimore walked on.

When he got back to the office, he was so full of the success of his most recent cure he had to tell his nurse all about it—from Ingersoll's first visit over a month ago to a detailed description of the morning's encounter.

When he'd finished, Mrs. Doyle was more thoughtful than congratulatory. Finally she said, "You'd better get yourself over to the library—"

"Pardon?"

"—and do some research on how that Millay woman passed on." She paused to let her words sink in.

"Oh my God!" Fenimore clapped his hand to his brow. Would he have to murder again?

NOTE: Robin Hathaway's newest Dr. Fenimore novel is *The Doctor and the Dead Man's Chest*, coming out just about now from St. Martin's. The two preceding novels were *The Doctor Digs a Grave*, which won the *Malice Domestic* award for Best Traditional Mystery and the *Agatha Award* for Best First Novel, and *The Doctor Makes a Dollhouse Call*.—Ed.



# It's a Wonderful Con

Larry Tritten



The blue neon cocktail glass caught Eddie's eye from the far end of the block, and as he drew closer he saw that the neon script beside it spelled out the name of the bar: FLORIAN'S. Its facade was narrow and inconspicuous, sandwiched between a videotape rental store and an art gallery whose window exhibited an oil painting of a wintry metropolitan street scene in Paris. It was just the right place, Eddie was sure, for his game. It was a downtown bar and would have a clientele of people who for the most part didn't know each other. His little game would not play well in the kind of neighborhood bar where there was a virtually familial atmosphere.

Eddie went into the bar and stood for a moment inside the doorway, checking out the darkened interior. There was a young couple at one of the small tables in the back with two big Macy's shopping bags on the floor beside them—Christmas shoppers having braved the crowds and earned their pink drinks in tall paper parasol-topped glasses; two solitary drinkers were hunched over beers at the near end of the bar, and down at the far end Santa Claus was drinking what looked to Eddie like an Irish coffee.

Santa Claus! A department store or Salvation Army Santa Claus taking a break, Eddie assumed. In any case his immediate impression was that this was the most authentic Santa Claus he'd ever seen this side of a movie. He reminded Eddie, in fact, of Edmund Gwenn in the original *Miracle on 34th Street*.

He also reminded Eddie of the classic Coca-Cola Santa Claus—huge, robust-looking, with a full beard and wearing a costume whose red velvet and snow white fur looked like a designer outfit, expensive and well-tailored.

Eddie went to the barstool just one away from the Santa Claus, sat down, and asked the bartender for a stinger. When it came, he lifted the glass, gestured slightly toward the Santa, and said companionably, "Here's looking at you, Mr. Kringle."

The man in the Santa Claus costume looked at Eddie, meeting his eyes, and in an equally friendly tone said, "Thank you. Apparently you know my name. But I don't know yours."

"Eddie Bascomb," Eddie said. He extended his hand and was slightly startled when it was encompassed momentarily in a huge hand whose warmth seemed to communicate a sense of vitality, assurance, and well being. Eddie smiled and said, "Of course everybody knows your name."

"Oh, not everybody," the Santa said. "At Valle Esmeralda on the Tambo, one of the Amazon's main stems, I'm all but unknown. And communism has made me persona non grata at any number of atheist households."

Eddie chuckled. "I believe in you, Kris," he said. "Because you always brought me everything I asked for. Always." It was true, too. Eddie's parents had been prosperous, his childhood privileged. He had always gotten whatever he wanted. And he'd inherited enough money

to make his life more than comfortable. Which was why his little game was so mean-spirited. He didn't need the money. Yet he enjoyed taking it; there was a high in suckering people. And he was highly enthusiastic about the prospect of adding the legendary saint to his list of victims.

"Apparently you were one of the good little boys," the Santa said. "The kind who keep me busy. And that pleases me although—" he met Eddie's gaze and tapped the rim of his glass thoughtfully "—I've been told by an elf or two after a hard day's work that they wished there were a few more bad boys." He winked and finished his drink.

"Can I buy you another Irish coffee?" Eddie asked.

The Santa looked at his empty glass. "Oh, this wasn't an Irish coffee! I rarely touch alcohol, except for an occasional nip of peppermint schnapps at home when it's below zero weather."

"Whatever it was, have another on me," Eddie said.

"Black coffee and whipped cream," the Santa said, then beckoned to the bartender with his glass. "Thank you, Eddie."

Very casually Eddie brought out the paperback copy of *Leonard Maltin's Movie & Video Guide* and put it on the bar, opening it, turning arbitrarily to a page in the middle of the book and pretending to become quickly engrossed in reading.

The Santa said, after a few moments, "Are you a movie fan, Eddie?"

Eddie looked up and shook his head. "I wouldn't say a fan," he said.

"But my girlfriend is a movie nut, and I'm trying to get more in sync with her tastes."

"What was the last movie you saw?"

"Video rental?" Eddie said.

"Whatever."

"In fact, we rented the remake of that Christmas movie the other day—*Miracle on 43rd Street*."

"Thirty-fourth Street," the Santa corrected him.

Eddie thought about it. "Nah, I think it's 43rd Street," he said, enjoying himself enormously.

"The one with Richard Attenborough doing an impression of me?"

"The British actor, yeah. The original had Maureen O'Hara and John Wayne." Eddie started to return his attention to the book, then said as an afterthought, "I saw Attenborough the other night in *Flight of the Phoenix*. My second favorite James Stewart movie."

The Santa nodded slightly as another coffee was set before him, regarding the whipped cream with a pleased expression. "Second favorite?" he asked Eddie.

Just right, Eddie thought. Sometimes he had to deftly manipulate the conversation in the proper direction—but the well-known saint was making it easy for him.

"After *It's a Wonderful World*," Eddie said, pausing, then added, "which is great, old as it is, and not even in color. But it pushes all the buttons."

"You mean *It's a Wonderful Life*," the Santa said.

Eddie said politely, "No, it's world. *It's a Wonderful World*. I've seen it at least ten times."

The Santa regarded Eddie with what seemed like tolerant amusement. "But the phrase is 'It's a wonderful life,'" he insisted gently. "It's a wonderful life."

"Close, but no cigar," Eddie said a little flippantly. "It's a wonderful world." He smiled confidently. "I'd bet anything on it."

"I would hate to see you do that," the Santa said. "You'd lose."

"It's my favorite James Stewart movie," Eddie said, giving the Santa a quietly smug look that indicated he was willing to overlook the man's ignorance in the matter.

But as Eddie expected, the Santa couldn't resist. "Well, Eddie," he said, "I'll tell you, if you were a betting man I could part you with some of your money."

Eddie gave a stagy little sigh. "Santa, we're talking about my favorite James Stewart movie, *It's a Wonderful World*, made in, I think, 1940, 1939."

"Later than that, I think," the Santa said. "But the title is, I'm sure, *It's a Wonderful Life*."

Eddie finally let exasperation harden his expression. "The movie I'm talking about is *It's a Wonderful World*, with James Stewart," he said stubbornly. He gave the Santa a defiant look, then glanced at the book on the bar as if suddenly becoming aware of its relevance.

"Ten bucks says you're wrong," the Santa said.

"Okay," Eddie said. "If that's as much confidence as you have in yourself"

"I'd bet any amount on this," the Santa said, his voice showing a hint

of irritation. "Fifty bucks." He smiled complacently.

"Is that what you have on you, Kris?" Eddie said with an edge of ridicule in his voice.

The Santa took out a wallet and put two one hundred dollar bills on the bar. "It's my gift money for my wife," he said.

"It's peanuts to me," Eddie said. "But I'll take your two, why not? We're betting that the title of my favorite James Stewart movie is *It's a Wonderful World*, I'd say '39 or '40."

The Santa watched Eddie as he looked through the book, stopped at a certain page, then peered closely at an entry and read aloud: "*It's a Wonderful World* (1939) 86m.\*\*\* D: W. S. Van Dyke II. Claudette Colbert, James Stewart, Guy Kibbee, Nat Pendleton, Frances Drake, Edgar Kennedy, Ernest Truex, Sydney Blackmer, Hans Conried. Screwball comedy with Colbert a runaway poetess, Stewart a fugitive chased by cops Pendleton and Kennedy. Very, very funny, with Stewart having a field day. Scripted by Ben Hecht, from his and Herman J. Mankiewicz' story. We swear by our eyes!"

Eddie handed the book to the Santa and indicated the reference with a forefinger. The Santa bent forward, squinting at the page as he read, and in the next few seconds a frown undermined his pleasant expression, gradually deepening into a scowl, his gaze narrowing with anger.

Oops, there goes Mrs. Claus's Christmas present, Eddie thought with cheerful disdain, scooping up

the two bills and slipping them between the pages of the book. He was smiling broadly because he could see from the Santa's expression that he really couldn't afford the loss. But Eddie, who was a man of means, could, and he demonstrated the fact with a truly bravura gesture. He waved the bartender, who had not seen what had happened, down from the other end of the bar. "That was the best stinger I've ever had," he said and pushed the two bills across the bar to the bartender. "Merry Christmas." Then, laying his finger alongside of his nose and giving a nod in a gesture of comical parody, he said "Merry Christmas" to the Santa and turned to leave.

His little game was a source of never-ending fun, he thought on his way to the door. In any season, too. And it was the perfect con because everyone was familiar with the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, but almost no one knew about the other one. It was a con that Eddie might have been able to make quite a lot of money with—if he hadn't thought of it essentially as a source of amusement. Besting a sucker who thought he was swifter than Eddie was his greatest pleasure.

As he put his hand on the door-knob, Eddie was stopped by something the Santa called out to him from the back of the bar. "I've got a present for you, too, Eddie. It's on the other side of that door."

Pausing, Eddie glanced back quizzically, then shrugged and went out. As he stepped from the bar into the street, he experienced a strange sensation, a feeling some-

thing like a momentary sense of vertigo crossed with an abrupt sense of transition as subtle as passing from sunlight into shadow, and in the moment of the passage he thought distinctly of the last scene in *It's a Wonderful Life* when a bell tinkles on the Christmas tree and George Bailey's daughter exclaims that every time a bell rings an angel gets its wings. But in his mind the sound of the bell was flat and ominous, and Eddie had a fleeting perception of the little girl as menacing, like the evil protagonist of *The Bad Seed*.

Eddie had taken only a few steps before he had another unsettling impression—that the city was in some unusual way different.

He paused and looked around at the buildings, the people on the street, but was unable to note a reason for the strange feeling. He was only fifteen blocks from his apartment and would normally have walked the distance for the exercise, but suddenly he felt subdued and tired and decided to hail a cab. He walked toward the end of the block, where getting one at the intersection would be easier, and as he reached it, he noticed a headline on one of the newspapers in the boxes there: VICE PRESIDENT STERN MISSES \$100 QUESTION ON MILLIONAIRE SHOW. Below the headline there was a photograph of an unmistakable Howard Stern grimacing at the camera. Before the impossibility of the headline fully registered, Eddie thought involuntarily, Vice President Stern! My God, who would the president be! In that moment he put his hand in

his pocket and experienced a little chill of apprehension as his fingers discovered something unfamiliar about his key chain. He took it out and saw that there were only two keys on the chain, that the familiar keys to his apartment, garage, Saab, safety deposit bank vault, upstate cabin, and girlfriend's apartment were missing. Some enigmatic premonitory sense compelled Eddie to take out his wallet, and he opened it and looked at his I.D. card. It did not have his Pacific Heights address but rather one in the Tenderloin on Turk Street a mere five blocks away.

Eddie found himself walking toward the address, aware that his gait was like that of the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead*. The thought came to him that he was having a lucid dream or was in some sort of hypnotic trance, and that enabled him to more or less transcend the fear that pressed in at the margin of his composure.

Eddie's address was a Tenderloin roominghouse on a block whose businesses had metal grates across the storefronts. There were empty white port bottles in nearly every doorway, and sleeping derelicts huddled in two of them. A bag lady pushing a shopping cart laden with green plastic garbage bags stared grimly at Eddie as he passed, and he had the uneasy realization that she was an uncanny ringer for a decrepit Joan Crawford.

Eddie saw his name beside Room 20 on the row of mailboxes. He let himself into the building and walked up a stairway whose shab-

by, archaic carpeting bore the stains of miscellaneous portentous substances.

His room was bleak, unfurnished except for a single mattress on the floor against one wall, a card table holding a dilapidated, ancient black-and-white, twelve inch TV, and a bookcase filled with books that were mostly about movies.

Thinking about his fifty-six inch Sony and DVD player, he switched on the TV set. As the turbid black-and-white image tremulously materialized, the sound of someone screaming loudly in the adjacent room came through the wall. Trying to ignore it, Eddie found himself looking at Frank Capra, clearly a centenarian, telling an interviewer that *It's a Wonderful Life IV* had just been wrapped and was indisputably Hulk Hogan's finest movie.

Eddie noticed *Leonard Maltin's Movie & Video Guide* on top of the bookshelf and picked it up. He found the listings for *It's a Wonderful Life* and its two sequels, but before reading them he noticed the listing that preceded them: "*It's a Wonderful Con* (2001) C-94m. \*\*\*\* D: Kris Kringle. Eddie Bascomb. A heartless con man makes the mistake of trying to victimize the real Santa Claus, with nightmare results. Odd moral fable is downbeat but emotionally effective."

There was no listing for *It's a Wonderful World*.

"How do you rate William Shatner's Mr. Potter with Lionel Barrymore's?" Eddie heard the interviewer ask over the screaming from the next room.



# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Hulton Getty/Tony Stone Images*

A light at the end of a tunnel? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "January Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the July-August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.



FICTION



# THE STALKER

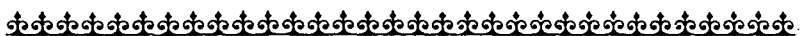
Dorothy Gilman



Illustration by Linda Weatherly

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1/02

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They had come a long way, crossing the country by a circuitous route, and for two hundred dollars a month they had found refuge in this shabby two family house on Greene Street in New Jersey, with the rear of Bartlett's department store at the top of the hill and below them the outer fringe of the town's ghetto. For two hundred dollars a month they possessed the second floor with two sunny bedrooms, a living room with a stained-glass window and an ill-fitting half-glass door at the top of their front stairs that must have been salvaged from another house; in the kitchen a door that opened to steep back stairs leading down into a grassless yard and to the basement.

Herself, Lucy . . . her two children, Rob and Susie.

There were other houses marching up the steep hill to the department store. Across the street a man religiously washed his car every Saturday morning while his wife watered peonies and then roses in the minuscule front yard. Next door to her, as the hill steepened, was a house with ramshackle porches jutting out like barnacles from each of its three floors, where clothes were hung out to dry, and sometimes a woman in long batik dresses sat in the sun. It was comforting for Lucy to look out at the house next door and see its lights at night, and people sometimes crossing a room: the thin, very prim-looking woman with three cats on the first floor, the batik woman on the second floor sometimes entertaining friends, the rough-looking man on

the third floor carrying his cans of beer from one room to another. Sometimes, after the children were asleep, she would turn out the lights in the kitchen and sit and watch for them, making up little stories about them out of loneliness. No one seemed to bother with curtains. Once in awhile the prim woman with cats visited the batik woman, and whatever they did was mysterious: they sat across from each other at a card table and the batik woman shuffled cards, laid them out, and they seemed to pore over them together while they talked.

It was a quiet street except in summer when all the windows remained open—there was no air conditioning on Greene Street—and when the telephone rang in the middle of that hot June night, it rang loud and clear, piercing the silence like a stiletto. It was Lucy's phone that wrenched her neighbors awake, and it had never rung before. She'd had it installed five weeks ago for calling out, in case Rob or Susie were sick, but it had never rung before and the sound of it woke her in a panic. She waited for it to stop, but it continued relentlessly. Before it could wake the children, she forced herself out of bed and walked barefooted into the hall to pick up the receiver. "Yes?" she said. There was a silence and then a man's voice said, "You're going to die soon. All of you. Don't you wish you knew when?"

She clutched the phone, her knees suddenly weak, her heart racing, and then she realized the man was still on the line, she could



hear his breathing, and she plunged the receiver down into its cradle.

It had to have been a wrong number, she told herself, it had to be a wrong number. She crept back into her bed and then left it to walk into the kitchen where the clock told her it was two in the morning. Turning on the light, she measured instant coffee into a cup. She heated water on the stove, and when it was boiling, she carefully poured it over the coffee and carried the cup to the oilcloth-covered table near the window and sat down. A light had come on in the batik woman's apartment next door, and this distracted her for a moment because the apartment was directly opposite her and only a little higher. She saw the woman walk to her window and stand there, a silhouette against the brightness behind her, and to Lucy she appeared to be staring straight down into the kitchen where she was sitting with her fingers curled around the warm mug of coffee. Lucy reached up and turned off the light. The woman remained there for a moment and then turned aside, her light was extinguished, and Lucy was left to shiver in the darkness.

Downstairs, in the apartment below Lucy's, Harry and Jennifer Coccio heard the ringing of the phone and "Damn—what time is it?" grumbled Harry, but his wife whispered, "Ssh, you'll wake the baby." Only an hour ago she'd fed Harry Junior his night bottle, and she prayed the sound wouldn't wake him. When at last the ringing stopped, she relaxed, but her next

prayer was that she be able to sleep again because at seven they had to deliver Harry Junior to her mother before each of them went off to work.

In the house next door Evva Brossard, in her batik nightgown, was thoughtful as she left the window and returned to her bed. In those moments before the girl had turned off the light in the kitchen Evva Brossard had seen her face. That phone call, she was thinking . . . even before it had stopped ringing she had known there was something horribly wrong about it, something evil. She had been christened Aoifa O'Hara when she was born, and she had the sixth sense.

Three hours later Lucy woke from an uneasy sleep to watch the sun creep inch by inch across the wall beside her bed. Something had happened during the night, she remembered, something dark and ugly, but she didn't want to think about it. Better to prepare for another hot day—she could already feel the humidity and left her bed and walked to the doorway of her children's room. There she smiled; they lay in their beds so innocently, curled up and rosy with sleep, lashes shadowing their cheeks: Rob, a stolid age seven with old-soul wisdom, his brown hair already needing a trim, she noticed, and Susie, her elfin six-year-old, her long brown hair flecked with blonde from the sun, her eagerness muted by sleep, her arms still cradling the teddy bear she called Ho-Ho.

And only myself to protect them,

thought Lucy, and turned away, keeping her distance from the telephone that had rung in the night, and walked into the kitchen to brew coffee. They had rented the apartment furnished, with its shabby odds and ends and leftovers from thrift stores, but this was a blessing, since they'd arrived with only suitcases. With a glance at the wall calendar inherited from previous tenants she remembered that she still had two months—until Labor Day—to puzzle out how to enroll Rob and Susie in public school, but for the summer she'd found a nursery school within walking distance where they asked no questions, only their address, and this too had been a godsend, it gave substance and structure to their new life on Greene Street.

From the pantry she removed corn flakes and cereal bowls, and from the ancient refrigerator milk and juice. "Breakfast!" she called and, returning to their room, "Breakfast, you sleepy-heads!"

Opening one eye Rob said with interest, "Am I still Robbie Brown today?"

She nodded. "Like a brown bear, yes."

"It's a *funny* game," said Susie.

"An *important* game," she emphasized. "And I'm Mrs. Brown, remember?"

"Like Susie's Ho-Ho," pointed out Rob. "I don't mind, it's fun."

"Today we learn more 'G' words in school," Susie confided. "I like Miss Perez, I do, Mommy."

"I'm glad," Lucy said. "And after school we'll buy you both new shoes."

"At Bartlett's?" When she nodded, "Oh good, we can ride the escalators!"

Thank heaven there was money for a few months, she thought. "And maybe ice cream cones."

That propelled them out of bed. From the paint-peeling bureau she tossed them jeans and T-shirts and socks and then withdrew to pull on a short denim skirt, blouse, and sandals. With a glance in the long mirror appended to the door she thought, How different I look, like a real person now. She had ruthlessly cut her long blonde hair short, very short, like a boy's. Without makeup, the scattering of freckles across her nose was apparent, and this is me, finally, she added. It was a beginning.

As usual, Susie had brought her family of small dolls to the table, and while eating her cereal she moved them about, talking to them while Rob studied the advertisements on the cereal box. After a glance at her watch Lucy said, "Five minutes to brush teeth!" Leaving the apartment, as she locked the door, she regarded it again with exasperation, wondering from what house it had been salvaged; frosted glass and three missing inches at the floor line did not seem a proper door to her, and nobody had a key to the downstairs front door, which was at least solidly built but could only be locked from the inside. Two hundred a month, Lucy, she reminded herself, you can't have everything.

Outside they turned to the right, leaving Greene Street behind, crossed the playground, and, once

through that, to Cross Street and the nursery school. Miss Perez was at the door, greeting each child, and she bestowed a radiant smile on Lucy. "Another hot one," she said. "Rob, Susie, good morning."

"Good morning," Lucy said, smiling back at her.

"Or are you used to this heat?" she asked. "Robbie says you moved here from California?"

Warily Lucy nodded.

"They're lovely children, Mrs. Brown. See you again at two!" Miss Perez turned away to welcome more children and then, ushering them inside, closed the door behind her.

And now there were the hours to occupy until two o'clock when their school ended, sighed Lucy, and she began her walk to the delicatessen to buy bread, eggs, fresh meat or chicken for dinner, and the New York newspaper that would be her reading for the day because keeping track of the outside world kept her from thinking of her own small world, made it more habitable and brought people into it. When the weekend came, she and Rob and Susie would walk to the library beyond Bartlett's—a lovely stone building set among shade trees—and exchange their books for new ones to read. But for today it was shoes, and just now food.

The delicatessen was expensive, but it was wiser not to hire a taxi to take her home from the grocery store twelve blocks away. A cab would be very conspicuous on Greene Street, and she couldn't afford to be conspicuous. The heat was rising already from the pavement

as she walked back up the hill to 29 Greene Street and nudged open the unlocked front door. How silent the house! The Coccios were gone, of course, but the hall was difficult to negotiate due to their detritus: a baby carriage, Harry Junior's stroller, and two chests of drawers they had no space for yet. She mounted the stairs, unlocked the door to their apartment, and was grateful to find the coolness of the night still lingering there. Glancing up at the stained-glass window in the living room she smiled, as she always did now, remembering how dark and opaque its colors became at night and how one evening, when the three of them returned from a brief walk, Rob had cried, "Look!" and had pointed.

And standing on the sidewalk they'd looked up at the stained-glass window to discover that what was dark in their lighted living room at night shone now like the sun from outside, its yellow brilliant, its blues and green radiant.

They had marveled.

"Why didn't I know that," she'd said in astonishment.

Rob had said loyally, "You can't know *everything*, Mom." If they were slowly acquiring a history here, she thought, it had begun that night with the changeling stained-glass window. Now Rob and Susie regarded the window with glee and with slanted, teasing glances at their mother and grins. She was learning about families: they could laugh.

Carrying her two bags of groceries into the kitchen, she stowed the food in the refrigerator, warmed up



the morning coffee, and sat down at the kitchen table with the New York Times. . . . There was an article on Madagascar; she read it slowly, with interest, having never known before that its inhabitants were called Magesy . . . in Africa another country was disintegrating; she winced at the violence . . . there was a story of a miraculous survival, a man lost at sea and picked up after three days, still alive. After this she read the columnists, then turned to the next section—it was the Business section—and noted several articles about California. A new electronics company had arrived in Silicon Valley called Zaboomb . . . Cannon Carlisle, fifty-year-old president of Zebra Communications, had purchased Cameo Productions for an undisclosed sum. Son of the late billionaire Calvin Carlisle, he was once one of Hollywood's most eligible bachelors but in recent years had become increasingly reclusive and was not available for an interview. On Wall Street the stock of Cameo, known for its low-budget films, had zoomed from seventeen dollars a share to thirty. She turned the page.

At two o'clock she retrieved two happy children from nursery school, and as they made their way up Greene Street, Susie gravely announced that she'd learned the word gravity in school that morning, it was what sort of held the earth in place, she said, and she could also spell the words gray and goofy.

"Goofy!" laughed Rob. "You're goofy."

The apartment was stifling now, and Lucy opened windows while the children shrugged off their jeans and pulled on shorts. When the telephone rang, Rob shouted, "Hey—our phone!" and rushed toward it.

Lucy said sharply, "No! Don't answer it, Rob! *Don't answer it!*"

But already he'd said, "Hello!" Receiver in hand, he gave her a puzzled, startled look and then turned back to the phone and held it to his ear. "They hung up anyway," he said.

She turned away from him so that he couldn't see her face. Walking quickly into her bedroom she stood quietly and forced herself to take deep breaths. She'd frightened Rob, and she shouldn't have done that, it could have been a salesman picking out their number at random or the nursery school or a wrong number, anyone. Pinning a smile on her face she joined them saying, "Okay—shopping now!" and they clattered down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk again.

Up the hill they marched, the three of them. Near the top of the street a man in a bright red T-shirt came out of the boarding house at Number 16 across the street—how seldom anyone walked up or down Greene Street, thought Lucy—and then they crossed the parking lot and entered the icy coolness of the department store.

"Absolute bliss," she murmured and wondered how long they could stay there.

Not sandals, Susie said firmly, everyone at school wore sneakers, and Rob, thinking about it, said she

was right. With chagrin Lucy realized she was still thinking in California terms, when they were now enrolled in a nursery school established for the disadvantaged inside the invisible line that marked the ghetto from town.

Once seated in the shoe department Robbie beamed at the woman who came to wait on them and said proudly, "We're here to buy sneakers."

"Me too," said Susie, and Lucy and the clerk exchanged smiles. After measuring for size she disappeared into the back room and returned with several boxes.

"Are they light-up sneakers?" Rob asked anxiously.

"This pair, yes."

Rob nodded. "They're great, Mom, you put your foot down and right away all these lights come on."

Lucy, after one glance, swallowed hard and said, "How much are they?"

"This particular pair costs sixty dollars."

Lucy winced. "I'm sorry, Rob, but we can't afford them."

"But Joey Laredo has a pair at school," he protested.

The clerk said sympathetically, "Mothers do so much for their children these days, don't they?"

Yes, thought Lucy, even kidnap them, but she was watching Rob. "Have you anything in the twenty dollar range?"

Rob was looking shocked and unbelieving. He had accepted buses and trains and Greene Street without question, but being unable to buy expensive light-up sneakers

was beyond comprehension. Lucy said gently, "This is New Jersey now, Rob."

Susie, nodding, said wisely, "It's part of the adventure, isn't it, Mommy."

"The adventure, yes," said Lucy weakly. That's what she had told them that day two months ago when she'd snatched them from school at recess time.

They took their time choosing the cheaper sneakers, and then Lucy waited patiently while Rob and Susie went up and down the escalators, and when they tired of this, it was time to go home and face their hot apartment. Home, she thought, and realized that slowly 29 Greene Street was becoming home.

Until she remembered the phone call and understood that home was not necessarily a refuge, but she did not want to think of this.

They made their last trip up the escalator to the store's rear entrance, Robbie and Susie hugging their plastic bags of twenty dollar sneakers. Walking through the parking lot they crossed to Greene Street, and as they passed the last parked car, the man in the bright red T-shirt emerged from behind a car to stroll down the hill behind them. She turned once to glance back at him: a dark face, almost gypsylike, his eyes concealed behind dark glasses. He didn't notice her glance, his face was turned away as he crossed the street to enter the boarding house at Number 16, where apparently he lived.

She told herself that it was only coincidence that he had left and



was returning at the same hour, and certainly she'd not seen him in the department store. Pure nerves, she thought, and scolded herself.

There was no phone call that night. Lucy lay awake for hours in her hot bedroom listening for it, waiting, telling herself it had been a mistake, a wrong number, or someone playing a horrible prank, yet ready to leap from her bed to still its ringing if it should ring. I'll just hang up, she decided, tossing and turning, I won't listen, and at the same time she pleaded with herself to relax. At last, around three o'clock, she succumbed to an uneasy sleep full of nightmares that she had mercifully forgotten when the alarm clock woke her. Opening her eyes she drew a deep sigh of relief; there had been no call in the middle of the night. Nothing, after all, to provoke such fear.

She lay very still for a moment, drawing strength from the stillness until she heard the Coccio baby crying downstairs, and only then did she get up and head for the kitchen, calling out to Susie and Rob that it was time to wake up.

This morning, as they descended the stairs to head for nursery school, the Coccios were just leaving. "Junior's colicky," Jenny Coccio told her with a shake of her head. To Lucy the girl looked far too young for marriage and motherhood—just out of high school, she'd confided, when she and Harry married—and she took motherhood very seriously. "I read all of them books," she'd told Lucy, and Harry Senior, blond and stocky, had nod-

ded. "All the time," he'd added proudly. Lucy had nodded and smiled. Whatever love and attraction had seen them marry was now concentrated on the child they'd produced, and they both seemed to regard Junior as an enormous surprise, a miracle too small and fragile to be regarded lightly. They were a little behind in their rent, Jenny had confided to Lucy one day, frowning, but Harry was working overtime and she was always hoping for a bonus at the shop where she worked. Lucy had tried not to glance around the hall at the expensive crib waiting for Junior to grow into and the chests of drawers and the stroller, not used yet.

"Well, he's a healthy darling," she said now, this morning, and Jenny bent a little so that both Rob and Susie could see him, and Lucy hoped with all her heart that she'd never be asked to babysit but doubted they would trust anyone with Junior except Jenny's mother. Best not to be too friendly with them anyway, she reminded herself, and watched them head for the back door that led into the neglected back yard where they parked their pickup truck.

There were no groceries to buy this morning after leaving Rob and Susie at school; she bought a newspaper and went home to read it over coffee before the apartment grew too hot. Paper in hand, she sank into the one comfortable chair in the living room, an overstuffed affair in color a bilious green. It was too heavy to move; the previous tenants had placed it just inside the living room, next to the long



hallway that ran the length of the apartment and across from their front door. She opened her newspaper, saw that guerrilla warfare had broken out again in West Africa... and suddenly froze. She need only turn her head to look at the door that led down to the street; one of the stairs—there were two that creaked—had creaked. Someone had walked through the unlocked front door and was standing on their stairs, there could be no other explanation.

Damn that door, she thought shakily: two frosted panes of glass, a knob, a lock, and three inches missing at the bottom, and damn those three missing inches that left her visible if anyone stood three steps below and looked inside. Could they see her, seated not eight feet away from the door; had they heard her turn a page of the newspaper? In the stillness she was certain that she could hear someone breathing and knew, simply *knew*, that she had not imagined someone on the stairs outside their door. Too frightened to move, she waited. . . . The stair creaked again, and then she heard the heavy door downstairs open and close.

They were gone, except, "Why do I say *they*?" she asked herself, it would have been *him*. At once she leaped up and raced into her bedroom to look out the front window to the street, but there was no one in view up the street and no window to look down the street.

She thought, he couldn't have found me so soon, I was so careful.

That afternoon, still shaken, Lucy decided recklessly that they

could afford to see a matinee showing of a Disney film up on the square. *Anything* became necessary to get out into the world, to get away from the apartment and distance herself from her terror of the morning. She sat stoically through the movie, aware of Rob and Susie's delight as they wriggled with pleasure, but when they left to walk home, she couldn't have described the film to anyone.

"Wasn't that wonderful?" Rob told her. "And when the bear chased —"

"Just like Ho-Ho," Susie reminded him.

And Lucy said, "Yes, that was wonderful."

They pushed open the heavy front door that locked only from the inside and climbed the stairs, where Lucy, reaching for her key, thought bitterly that the only door with a key was a half-glass door that anyone could break through. She automatically turned on the electric fan and headed for the kitchen to prepare dinner; the children vanished into their room, and she could hear them acting out parts of the movie, giggling and happy.

And then the phone rang. Lucy felt her heart thud, and before one of the children could answer it, she picked up the receiver.

It was the same voice. "Did you enjoy the movie?" he asked. "You won't be alive much longer for movies."

So he had followed them . . .

She hung up the phone, feeling sick at her stomach. What have I done, bringing Rob and Susie with



me, she thought, I was so bent on escaping, so happy to be with them again.

"Mommy," called Susie, "it's Winnie-the-Pooh night, remember?"

Yes, she thought, it was a Winnie-the-Pooh night, she could try to hang onto that.

It was the next morning that Evva Brossard happened to glance out of her bedroom window overlooking the street, and what she saw startled her. A man was standing on the sidewalk below her, staring up at the house next door, simply standing there as if watching someone, or waiting. Following his gaze, she saw that it was the second floor of the house next door at which he was staring, and with a glance at her watch she saw that it was nearing eight o'clock when the young mother next door would be leaving with those two charming children of hers to take them—or so she guessed—to Esther Perez' summer nursery school. He looked respectable enough, in his faded jeans and a tweed jacket, but why was he standing there, she wondered, people didn't do that on Greene Street.

The man suddenly glanced up at Evva Brossard's window, as if feeling her eyes on him, and she quickly stepped back. I don't like this, she thought, and I don't like the look of him. The intensity of his gaze was narrowed and cold, an ordinary looking man except for those eyes that had so briefly glanced at her window. A dangerous man, she thought, and not a good one. And he'd been waiting for—what was her name—Mrs. Brown?

A few minutes later when she looked out he had gone. Closing the window she walked to the other side of her apartment and out onto the porch; she saw the Coccios come out of the driveway in their pickup truck, and a few minutes later Mrs. Brown and her two children walked out the front door and down the steps. Evva Brossard stood there until the three of them disappeared, and only then was she reassured that the stranger was no longer there.

But she had become aware now; her sixth sense had been roused. This needs watching, she thought, remembering the phone calls in the night. On impulse she walked into her living room and drew out her Tarot cards. . . . They all came to her for readings—Mrs. Stowalski on the first floor; sometimes even Mr. Hannagan on the top floor, looking embarrassed; Minnie Keppel up the street; and the Grecos across the street—it was a gift she had. Shuffling the cards, she concentrated on the lingering feelings that had alarmed her, and after cutting the cards she laid them out in order. The Eight of Swords was a woman blindfolded and in bondage—not good. The Ten of Swords, a woman with her face buried in her hands. The Five of Pentacles, two forlorn and ragged figures walking in the snow. When The Tower card followed—the tower struck by a bolt of lightning from heaven—she stopped, appalled, and yet . . . and yet the card had surfaced upright, which brought hope. Checking this in her old worn book, she nodded as she read, "The suffering of an indi-

vidual through the forces of destiny being worked out in the world."

She did not complete the reading. Those last words were stern; she read them as a warning to herself. The forces of destiny were not to be interfered with, not ever; it brought grave responsibility, it meant that whatever would happen had to happen, it was foreordained. One did not trifle with destiny, one must allow it to unfold without interference.

But there might still be something she could do; she could at least make her presence known.

Esther Perez was particularly welcoming the next morning. "Your Rob and Susie are so *bright*, Mrs. Brown," she said. "We're planning a party in two weeks, ice cream and cake and paper hats. I so hope you can come, it's on Saturday because so many parents work." She added anxiously, "We could use a few parents to help. If you should have the time to volunteer—"

"I'll see," Lucy said evasively. "I'd like to, I really would, but—" She had glanced behind Miss Perez and had seen the Man From Number 16 loitering on the corner, watching. "I have to go," she said abruptly, and added with total inadequacy, "They're saving my newspaper for me."

What a ridiculous thing to say; Esther Perez looked taken aback, and then her face closed as if she'd been snubbed. Lucy reached out and touched her arm. "Please," she said. It was all that she could think to say to beg understanding. "Please," she repeated and turned

and left. I wonder if I'm losing my mind, she thought.

At the delicatessen she bought ice cream, grapes, and her newspaper and walked slowly back to Greene Street, aware that he was behind her all the way.

I'm being stalked, she realized; surely this makes it a police matter, it has to. . . . She would go to the police tomorrow and tell them she was being stalked and describe the man; she could even tell them where he lived. This afternoon? No, not today, she thought, I feel too fragile, they'll sense that, I must be very strong and calm when I go there or they won't believe me. The police station is on the square, I've seen it, but—will *he* see me go there? I must be careful.

Just now she wanted to hide. Not in the house where a phone could ring; she would take her newspaper and a chair out into the back yard where she couldn't be seen, where the sun could warm the coldness in her and calm her frayed nerves until it was time to bring her children home.

It was not much of a back yard; it was mostly gravel, with a concrete slab where the Coccios parked their truck; only a few blades of grass had managed to push their way through the gravel to the sun. She carried a chair from the kitchen down the stairs and placed it in the middle of the yard, thinking she might even restore her old California tan with her short skirt, sandals, and the cotton shirt she'd bought at the Good Will shop for a dollar. The shop was two doors away from the nursery school, and





it had amazed her what could be bought there: shorts for Rob and Susie, and T-shirts.

She opened her newspaper and tried to concentrate on its headlines until a voice interrupted this futile effort to make sense of what she was trying to read. It was the batik woman; she had come out on her porch and was leaning over the railing and calling to her.

"Do come up and see me," she called from her porch. "I'm Evva Brossard; we're neighbors and your children are darling. Are they in Esther Perez' nursery school?"

A startled Lucy stared up at this woman she'd seen so often from her window. She wanted to call something polite back to her, after which she could hurry back into her house; the woman's call to her felt like an invasion, she hadn't expected to be noticed, she felt hostile, spied upon, and yet—and yet—

How hungry I am to talk to someone, she realized. Someone adult.

She stood up uncertainly, staring up at the woman and in conflict.

"I've just made fresh lemonade," Evva Brossard called cheerfully. "Come just for a minute. And I have something your two children might like."

It couldn't hurt, thought Lucy. If she asks too many questions I'll just leave, say something polite and leave. "All right," she said reluctantly.

"Second floor," called the woman. "Front door's not locked, just come up."

Up two flights of stairs Lucy went, quite accustomed to a life of

stairs now. Evva Brossard was waiting at the top, and Lucy saw that her black hair, severely swept back into a knot in the back, had a few stripes of white unseen from below. She wore a caftan—batik, of course. "Come in," she said, "I'm glad you came."

The living room held a faint scent of incense, but what comforted Lucy was that it was the sort of living room she'd once known, long ago: ordinary and homelike, a shabby velvet couch, faded rose wallpaper, a large round mahogany table placed in the center of the room, and a lamp with an opaque green glass lampshade, like a hat, and beyond, the door to the porch. Lucy found herself seated at a chair carried to the round table while Evva Brossard brought in two tall glasses of lemonade from the kitchen.

"There," she said, seating herself opposite her at the table. "The weather's been so hot, hasn't it? Have you fans, dear? I can lend you one if you haven't."

Lucy agreed the weather was hot and said that yes, there was a fan. They made desultory conversation while they drank their lemonade—the Coccios, the weather, the steepness of Greene Street—until Evva Brossard, rising, said, "But this is what I thought your two children might enjoy." She went into the kitchen and returned with a long, thin, colorful box and placed it in front of Lucy. "A game," she said, her lips curving in a shy smile. "Uncle Wiggily. Just right, I think, for their age."

Lucy stared at it in surprise. "Uncle Wiggily! I played with that

when I was a child. Oh, they'll love it—but let me pay you for it.”

Evva Brossard laughed. “Goodness, no, it’s a gift,” and with a glance at her wristwatch added, “You’ll want to get back to your sunbath,” and Lucy realized, with relief, that she could leave now. She was accompanied to the door, where Evva Brossard suddenly turned to her and said, “I want to offer you something else, my dear. A place—at the right time—if you should need it. For your children.” She reached out and touched Lucy’s shoulder. “You’re a very brave young lady.”

“Brave?” echoed Lucy, staring at her, finding something almost hypnotic in the woman’s gaze, and then, shaking herself, “Oh! Well, thank you!” And hurried down the stairs not knowing whether to laugh or to cry: to laugh at the stranger who presumed to know or guess—but how? Or whether to cry at the sympathy the woman had exuded, and her knowingness. But what had caused her to say that?

On the other hand, the batik woman had offered her something more than a game for Rob and Susie, and this was new and strange to her. Impossible of course to ever trust a stranger with Rob and Susie, and yet—

She raced up the stairs to the kitchen and sat down at the table, her face burning with embarrassment and self-consciousness as she struggled against a feeling of having been comforted. The batik woman had been kind.

I’m not used to kindness, thought Lucy, but why did she say that?

What have I done that she’s noticed, or was she just offering to babysit?

She would not go into the backyard again, not by herself, or make any such contact like that again.

The children were enchanted by the Uncle Wiggily game and when Lucy explained that it was a gift from the woman next door, she pointed to the porch where Evva Brossard sat reading a magazine. Impulsively she said, “She’s over there now; why don’t you go out and call thank you to her?”

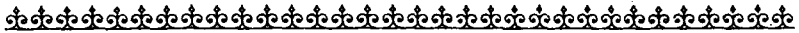
“Oh, goody,” Susie said, snatching up the game, and she and Rob opened the back door and ran down the stairs.

Lucy watched from the window, smiling, as Susie held up the game and shouted, “Thank you!”

Rob, older, grinned and said, “Susie calls you the Rainbow Lady.”

Lucy was startled by this, but Evva Brossard, leaning over the railing, called back, “Anytime you want another player, come up to my apartment and we’ll have a really cutthroat game!”

The next morning, after leaving the children at school, Lucy headed for the police station. It stood just off the village green, on the corner of Cromwell Street, a white brick building set back from the street, its well-kept green lawn occupied by a flagpole and a sign: POLICE HEADQUARTERS. The town vacillated between calling itself a town or a small city, cherishing its Colonial atmosphere because George Washington had slept there when he was a general, and the authorities kept



the spacious glass and cement tech labs well away from its center.

Once again Lucy was struck by how the police headquarters had kept to the Colonial motif; it was almost a living room that she walked into, except for one long wall of filing cabinets, the benches under the window overlooking the street, and a man at the desk. He was on the telephone, and he looked her over with a professional eye while she stood in front of him, waiting.

When he hung up, she said, "My name is Lucy Brown, and I'd like to see someone about being stalked. By a man."

"Stalked?" he echoed as if the word was foreign to him.

She nodded.

He considered this, frowned, punched a key on an intercom, and said, "Chief? You busy? Young woman here says she's being—er—stalked." There was a silence, and then he nodded toward the door. "He says come in. Chief Willaby."

She entered the inner office to confront a heavysset, broad-shouldered man with a glitter of badges to brighten the black of his uniform. He pointed to the chair facing him and said in a fatherly voice, "Now, what's this about being stalked? Well, we'll get to that in a minute. If you'll first give me your name and address?"

"Lucy Brown, 29 Greene Street."

"Driver's license?"

"I don't have a car," she told him. "Just two children," she added, feeling that somehow she needed something more to establish herself as a person.

"Right," he said, giving her a

quick glance. "Okay, what's this about being stalked?"

"Well—followed," she amended. "When I took the children up the street to Bartlett's on Saturday, he was behind us, and again when we went home. Yesterday when I took the children to nursery school—Esther Perez' nursery school—he was behind us. And he followed me to the delicatessen and back, and later to the movies."

"Can you describe him?"

"Oh yes, and I've seen where he's living. At the boarding house on Greene Street, number 16."

He sat back in his chair. "You mean he lives just up the street from you, and you believe he's following you?"

"Yes."

His smile was kind. "Mrs. Brown, don't you think it possible—his living on the same street—that you've imagined this? That's a very small area you describe: delicatessen, nursery school, department store, movies. Don't you think it possible it's merely coincidence?"

She was going to have to go further, she realized, hating this. "I think he's also the man who makes phone calls to me at very strange hours."

"Phone calls? What kind of phone calls, obscene?"

"No."

He said patiently, "You'll have to tell me more, Mrs. Brown. Threatening calls?"

She nodded. "Telling me I don't have long to live. And then he hangs up."

He frowned at this. "That's a bit more serious. If it's a prank, it's not

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a very funny one. You think the phone calls could be made by this man you think follows you?"

"It's why I'm here."

He nodded. "Okay, let's have that description of the man. We can make a few inquiries at—what number Greene Street did you say?"

"Number 16." She tried to describe him as best she could . . . not quite six feet tall, perhaps thirty-five, and then she added helplessly, "But I try not to look at him. I know what you're thinking, but I haven't wanted to look at him and—and he keeps his distance."

He said in a kind voice, "Well, we'll make some inquiries, Mrs. Brown, send one of my men over to Number 16. . . . Supposing you come back—my men are busy right now—say, on Friday?"

"But that's two days from now!" she protested.

His voice was gentle as he explained. "We're a small town, Mrs. Brown, and we don't have a large work force. We'll make some inquiries tomorrow, probably evening, since he just may have a job, you know. We'll try to have something for you Friday morning." He rose from his desk, forcing her to stand, too, and reached across it to shake her hand. "Glad you came to us," he told her. "Don't worry too much, we'll get to the bottom of this, I promise you."

She nodded, managed a stifled thank you, and left.

On impulse—incapable of facing Greene Street yet—she crossed the street to the square, where there were benches and green grass and

trees and she could sit a moment to steady herself. She made herself look at the flowers and then at the cars as they drove around and past the square, and after a few minutes she straightened her shoulders, recrossed the street, walked to the department store, up the escalator, and back to Greene Street. She would turn off their telephone until Friday, she decided; Rob and Susie wouldn't notice, and she suspected that if she did answer he would say, "How clever of you to go the police." Or wouldn't he have known?

On Friday morning, after leaving Rob and Susie at school, Lucy retraced her steps to police headquarters, thinking that if a heart could flutter hers was fluttering with fear and hope. The police would have visited this man, they'd have seen him for what he was, perhaps even have arrested him for harassing her, or given him a severe warning. The same man was at the desk. "Be a few minutes," he told her. "Chief's on the telephone."

She sat on a bench trying to be patient, and when at last she was admitted to the chief's office, she said eagerly, "Well?"

"Do sit down, Mrs. Brown," he said with a nod of his head and appeared to study her face for a moment before he nodded and sighed.

"We've checked out this man," he told her. "You did feel that he'd been following you?"

"Stalking," she said.

He sighed again, picked up a sheet of paper, and glanced at it, shaking his head.

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"I can only tell you, Mrs. Brown, that we've thoroughly checked him out. He's a salesman—has all the credentials—waiting here for his next assignment. Took the room for a month, but expects to be leaving before then, as soon as the call comes from Fit-Rite Shoes. Name's Herbert Fennel and says he's never stalked anyone in his life."

She stared at him in shock. "You believe this? Did you check the right man? There *has* to be a mistake!"

"I'm sorry," he said, and she realized he was regarding her with pity. "Sometimes a pretty young woman like you—well, imagines things. Same neighborhood, after all."

She shook her head. "I don't imagine things. What—what did you mean by credentials? How could he—"

"Business cards," said the chief. "Three letters on his desk post-marked New York City from the Fit-Rite company. Sample shoes in a duffel bag. I'm sorry," he added.

"Sorry!" she cried. "Sorry?" and bitterly, "You should come and hear his phone calls in the middle of the night, telling me he's going to kill me."

Now he did look at her as if she were mad. His gaze was—yes, he was pitying her. "You can complain to the telephone company about those, you know. That's not in my jurisdiction. Obscene phone calls—a prankster—"

"I have to be killed before you believe me," she said accusingly.

His voice was kind. "I'll tell you what we can do, make sure a patrol car patrols your street—Greene Street, is it?—every night."

"A patrol car," she repeated dazedly, and understood at last there was no help to be found here. Struggling for the dignity that had been ripped into shreds, she rose to her feet and said without expression, "Thank you," and left the police station realizing that she had no world left, she had nothing, her only hope had been shattered. The clock on the steeple of the church across the square boomed out a note, and when she glanced at its face, she was staggered to see that it was only nine o'clock, she had been with Chief Willaby only ten minutes. A world could collapse in just ten minutes, she realized bleakly.

She walked unseeingly across the street toward the parklike square. Once among its paths she found a bench and sat down and groped for something to cling to, but she found nothing. Chief Willaby had pronounced her death sentence; his disbelief returned her to a nightmare where there was nothing and no one to fight. She was being reduced to a cipher.

"Are you all right?" someone asked beside her on the bench.

She turned and stared blankly at the man sitting there. His realness was almost an affront to her: sandy thatched hair, ruddy skin, brown suit, a suitcase at his feet. Her eyes lingered on the suitcase, focusing slowly.

"I said are you all right?" he demanded.

She nodded. "I'm all right."

"Damn it, of course you're not all right," he snapped. "I saw you walk across the street. Were you aware that you nearly got hit by a car?"

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The driver almost ran into a hydrant trying to avoid you. You didn't even hear him swearing at you. I did."

"I'm sorry," she said politely, only to realize that tears were running down her cheeks.

"No, you're not, you're in shock of some kind. Wake up," he said, leaning over and snapping his fingers in front of her eyes. "What's wrong? What is it?" When she only shook her head, he said, "Look, I don't live in this town, I'm just passing through." He pointed to the suitcase at his feet. "You'll never see me again. Talk—it'll do you good. What's wrong?"

She wiped her cheeks with a sleeve and said bitterly, "All right. I've been followed by a strange man all week, and I get phone calls at night telling me he's going to kill me, and the police—" A sob broke through her anger. "They've just told me I'm imagining it all, that's what they really meant."

"I don't understand," he said. "Why would they think that?"

"Because the man who's been following me lives up the street from me, and they said—said they investigated and he denied everything. But he is going to kill me. Me and my two children, Rob and Susie. He keeps telling me."

"He actually tells you that?"

"Yes, on the phone."

Frowning, he said, "What does he say?"

Taking a deep breath, reaching into her purse for a tissue to dry her eyes, she tried also to reach back to reality. "Like—like we went to a Disney movie the other afternoon,

and when we got home, the phone rang—nobody else calls, we're new here—and he said, 'Did you enjoy the movie? You won't be alive much longer to see movies.'"

"Good God," he said. "But why? Who on earth would want to kill you?"

She hesitated, and then, because of the suitcase and because he was listening and he was kind, she said, "Have you ever heard of Cannon Carlisle?"

"Cannon Carlisle?" he repeated, startled. "Everybody's heard of Cannon Carlisle, anyone who reads newspapers, at least. Richest man in the country, isn't he? In Hollywood, anyway." He shook his head. "The tabloids have a field day with him; they always said he could make or break any actress." He added wryly, "As you can see, I buy groceries at the supermarkets, too, and look at the headlines. Why do you ask?"

She said, "I'm desperate enough to tell you why. It's he who wants me killed."

"You? Cannon Carlisle? You can't be serious. I don't understand," he said, scowling. "Why you?"

"Because I'm Mrs. Cannon Carlisle."

He stared at her in disbelief. "I never heard of his being married."

She said defiantly, "I have two children to prove it."

"That's no proof. It was never in the newspapers, was it, a big story like that?"

She stared across the park at the passing cars. She said without expression, "I was a typist in the typing pool in Texas when they were





making a film there. I 'caught his eye' as he put it, and he—what's the expression, swept me off my feet? Yes, it was in the papers when it happened—ten years ago. Marriage to a Lucy Ballard, an elopement to Las Vegas. But then they learned Lucy Ballard was a nobody, just a typist from a backwater town. They couldn't believe it, and Cannon wouldn't confirm it, he just laughed. It was decided that some newsman had played a practical joke by putting the two names in the register."

Astonished, doubtful, he said, "But surely pictures of you together—at movie previews, at parties?"

She looked at him wonderingly, "Oh no—not ever. I was simply a captive. I asked him once why he married me." Her voice broke.

"Yes?"

She said wearily, "He said—said because I was neither beautiful nor an actress, just a pretty nobody. Who wouldn't have affairs. Wouldn't leave. And he was forty and wanted children." Controlling her voice she added bitterly, "And I was never allowed to leave. His life went on, mine stopped. Even the children were taken away from me. Nurses, governesses, a school—except for an hour or two occasionally, or Christmas or a birthday. He wanted—what he wanted—"

"Was what?"

"Possession. Total possession."

"I can't believe this," he said in a shocked voice. "It's too crazy."

She looked at him scornfully. "I didn't suppose you would," she told him. "It just happens to be true, and now he's found me."

"But this man you said keeps telephoning you—"

"And following me."

"How can you be sure your husband sent him?"

"Because no one leaves Cannon Carlisle," she said flatly. "Not ever. He breaks people—like pretzels. And I left him. I ran away."

Worried, baffled, he said, "Look, give me your address, will you? And your phone number? My name is Thomas Quinn, by the way," he added as he fumbled in pockets for pen and paper.

"Why?" she asked.

"Here's a scrap of paper—pen, too." He handed them to her. "Why? Because I'll think of you; do you think I can forget what you just told me? And any minute Joe will be here—it's a job interview in New York, you see, but I feel awful, just leaving."

She smiled faintly. "It's because you're leaving I could talk to you. At least you listened. The police didn't. And you've been kind."

His face tightened. "They did say they'd patrol?—you're writing your address?"

She scrawled, *Lucy Brown, 29 Greene Street*, not bothering to add her telephone number, he'd forget all this by nightfall. "Does your friend drive a blue car?" she asked, handing it to him. "Because there's a man waving at you across the street."

"Oh damn," he said and stood up. He looked down at her and then at his suitcase and nodded. "I've got to go."

"Yes," she acknowledged. "Good luck on your interview."



"Thanks."

She watched him dash across the street; his friend was opening the trunk of the car, and as he stowed his suitcase in it, he turned and looked back at her. He shouted, "Look after yourself, Lucy Brown!" He climbed into the passenger seat, the car drove away, and when it had vanished, Lucy felt an unbearable loneliness. She picked up her purse, glanced at her watch, and walked to Bartlett's department store, up the escalator, and out to Greene Street. The children mustn't know . . . if she fell apart now, who would comfort them; they too would become frightened and anxious. Until the last moment she must keep them from knowing, and she could do that if only she could be calm.

But why oh why did I bring them, she asked herself again. . . . She'd noticed so many times the wads of money casually tossed into the desk in the gun room . . . the very rich could do that. And he was away . . . in San Francisco on business, they'd said. She'd taken the money, not even counting it, and she had walked slowly, not running through the gardens, until she reached the small door in the wall that Juan, the butler, had once pointed out to her. After that a taxi to the children's school at recess time, when they would be out playing in the yard, and they'd seen her so seldom they'd rushed to the gate, overjoyed at her being there.

"Ssh," she'd told them, "we're going on an adventure."

"Ho-Ho, too?" asked Susie, clutching her bear.

No one had seen them climbing into the waiting taxi. From there it was the bus station, and a bus for a hundred miles, and then a train, another bus going south and then a bus north, staying at shoddy motels, and finally New York City and a bus to New Jersey, abruptly getting off at Gatesville because it had trees and a town square and looked pleasant.

She stopped and took a deep, deep breath and then another. The hyperventilating ceased, leaving only the racing heart, the dread, and the hopelessness.

But there had to be something—*something*—she could do.

This helped. To *do* something. Not stand there taking deep breaths and fighting helplessness.

She would talk to him, the man at 16 Greene Street, this man who had been sent to kill them. She knew where he was staying—he'd certainly made no secret of that—and now that she knew his name, she would confront him.

He wouldn't expect that.

Thomas Quinn had arrived in New York in time for his afternoon interview at Farris, Cummins, Holden and Jacobs. He thought it had gone very well, and he was ready now to give himself over to the pleasures of a Manhattan that he'd not visited since law school while he waited to hear if the job was his. Joe was very warmly taking him into his own exuberant and established social life; he seemed to know everyone and there had been a small party that very night, and on Saturday he promised a



very special party; there would be theater and time to see several old classmates, and although it wasn't his style of living, he looked forward to the novelty of it. He felt it was good research on what life might be like if he accepted his as yet unsecured position. It would be exhilarating, busy, hectic. He wondered how much he'd miss Cape Cod, the simpler life, the people there.

It was when he was introduced to Herman Welding that night that he remembered Lucy Brown. He supposed he'd not really forgotten that crazy conversation on a park bench—it had been too bizarre to forget—but he'd sidetracked it, pushed it down, relegated it to the past; it had disturbed him, but he was in New York now. . . .

Herman Welding was Hollywood, and Joe explained, in introducing him, that he was a top film producer. Thomas looked at him with respect: a pleasant, jowly man, surprisingly friendly for so important a person. And suddenly Thomas found himself with questions to ask as they stood together, drinks in hand and observing the mixed group at the party.

He heard himself say abruptly, "You know, I recently met someone who knows Cannon Carlisle; have you ever met him?"

Herman Welding gave him a sharp glance. "I'd say that no one—no one—could actually *know* Cannon Carlisle."

"What does that mean?" asked Thomas.

"Charming bastard," said Welding. "I've met him, yes. Of course no-

body seems to meet him now that his playboy days are over. A bit of a recluse, they say."

At least he hadn't been affronted by the question or walked away. Thomas said casually, "He's never married?"

Welden shrugged. "There've been rumors. They blossomed about a decade ago but proved to be only rumors. That's Hollywood for you . . . all that's needed is a playboy billionaire, and rumors accumulate. Good copy."

Frowning, Thomas said, "You mean rumors that he's married?"

"Or was, maybe once, who knows? He's ruined a good many starlets' lives." Welding shook his head. "A bastard. A man like that, the rumors change every month." He laughed cynically. "One tabloid even picked up the rumor—far-fetched—that he had a child, or children. Don't know where *that* one came from."

"Children! Doesn't anyone ask him, or am I being naive?"

Welding smiled. "That you are—very naive. A man with that kind of money and that kind of power and an ego the size of an elephant, you'd be risking a Purple Heart to ask him anything about his personal life. Oh, Milliken," he called to a passing guest, "you're just the man I want to see," and with a polite "Excuse me," he walked away.

My God, thought Thomas and stood transfixed, glass in hand, remembering that park bench vividly now, and a distraught and pretty Lucy Brown. Charming . . . cold as ice . . . rumors of marriage, rumors of . . .



"What's the matter?" asked Joe, bringing him a fresh drink. "You look as if you've just seen a ghost."

Thomas laughed. "The best prescription for a ghost is that drink in your hand."

"Good," said Joe. "There's someone I especially want you to meet."

And Thomas followed him back into a thoroughly enjoyable present.

Lucy walked up the steps of Number 16 and through the unlocked door to the entry, lined with mailboxes. Examining them, she found Fennel, 203, and her anger mingling with fear, she climbed to the second floor and knocked on the door of 203.

His voice, familiar now, said, "Come in."

She opened the door. He was sitting calmly in a chair by the window as if expecting her, or perhaps he sat there often, watching the street; he must even have seen her walk up the steps to Number 16. She said angrily, "You've been following me."

If he were at all startled by her appearance, he didn't show it. His face was utterly without expression, as if every trace of emotion had been sucked from it by a vacuum until it was as smooth as an eggshell on which had been sketched a thin mouth, a straight nose, a pair of—she drew in her breath sharply as she met his eyes. Gray eyes, cold, empty, with an anger so old it outdated hers.

"And the phone calls are from you, admit it."

He merely shrugged.

Her voice trembled a little as she added, "Threatening to kill us."

He nodded.

"Yes."

"Why?" she demanded passionately. "Why? I've two children, you've seen them. You can't want to kill *children*."

He looked at her, and there was the faintest stirring of amusement in his glance. He said, "Why not?"

"You could *do* that?"

His voice was not unfriendly. "Lady, I'm being paid a fortune, more money than I'd ever see in a lifetime."

"To murder three people?"

"To kill three people, yes."

She said accusingly, "And spend the rest of your life in prison. It's worth that?"

He laughed. "You think I'm that stupid? Before they even find you dead, I'll be halfway out of the country. Eight million bucks buys a hell of a lot of protection. Private plane, border bribes, a damned good life in South America."

"Eight million!" she gasped.

"You should be flattered," he said. "Your husband—"

"—is Cannon Carlisle," she said, and when he nodded, "Doesn't it occur to you to wonder why he'd want his own wife and his two children killed? That he's gone mad, is insane?"

He sighed. "Lady, I don't care what he is, all I know and care is that I get money—big money. No more grubbing for jobs, no more smalltime hustling. It's my big break."

"And you don't care—" her voice broke—"don't care that you have to



kill us, when we've done nothing to you?"

"Look, lady, I got my problems, you've got yours."

"You call being killed a *problem*?" she gasped.

"I can't help you," he said curtly. "Sorry."

"But children? Don't you see how insane he is, his own children?"

"Not his any more, are they? That's what he said."

"He really *is* mad."

"But rich," he pointed out.

"You're insane, too," she flung at him.

"No, just poor," he said.

"I've been poor," she told him. "I was a typist when I met him."

"Lucky you, to marry rich." But his voice was not without sympathy.

It occurred to her how strange this conversation had become, and she thought, we're both victims, how very strange. She asked in a faltering voice, "When—when are you planning to kill us?"

He shrugged. "Not too soon." He hesitated and then said thoughtfully, "One thing I could do for you."

"What?" she asked breathlessly.

"I can make it fast—and soon. Sudden and fast. He wouldn't have to know *that*."

"He?" she faltered. "You mean—he wanted to torture me like this first?"

"That was the idea."

As the enormity of this sank in, she was left without words or feeling. It was too great a shock; she could only stare at her executioner and then, understanding what he'd offered, she said, "If it has to hap-

pen—has to—" She nodded and walked out.

Evva Brossard, seeing her walk down the street, thought, something has happened. She was shocked by the look on the girl's face: where had she been, what had she seen? She looked defeated and desperate, and fumbling for an explanation she remembered the phone calls in the night and the man who followed Lucy Brown. She closed her eyes, suddenly dizzy as she felt a cloud of darkness overwhelm her. She saw the Tarot cards spread again, the Tower being struck by lightning, and with this she felt a presentiment of violence, and the words, *Two will die*.

Still dizzy she felt her way to a chair and sank into it. Not since she had foreseen her husband's death eleven years ago had she experienced such a terrifying episode of foreknowledge.

Lucy, passing Evva Brossard's house, was experiencing pure terror. He'd promised to do it "soon," but when would he do it? Do was a kinder word than kill, he would do *it* when? She wondered which was better, do or it, and why must she avoid the word kill? Because, she thought, he would have a gun and he had been hired to kill the three of them, and the horror of it was, whom would he kill first? Would Rob and Susie have to see their mother killed? Or—and this was an equally unbearable thought—would she have to see them murdered?

I'll have to go back to him, she

thought, chilled by the thought of returning to Cannon. If I'd left by myself, none of this might be happening. She'd been so wrong—selfish—to bring Susie and Rob with her, but he would never accept them back without her, his rage, his ego, would refuse to let her go free.

It could be manageable, she told herself; there were the gardens, the pool, a game room, and she'd been given catalogues from which to select clothes, and there were books. . . . The books had preserved her, hadn't they? She'd had only a high school education, and after years of reading romance novels she'd grown restless. One could say I educated myself, she thought with a wry smile. The lives of kings and queens and czars, and then the plays: Racine, Shakespeare . . . She'd really appreciated Racine's *Britannicus*—all those betrayals, all those spies. She'd been spied on . . . oh yes, there had been eyes everywhere: the gardeners, the butlers, the maids . . .

I could endure it again, she thought, if it saves Rob and Susie. Except with a shock there came the thought, would he even allow her back, after her escape, and knowing how cleverly, and for so long, she'd studied the weak links in her cage? If she begged to return, her surrender would be weighed against the insult to his ego, and she realized how slender a hope that was. What had she blurted out to that nice young man in the park, that Cannon Carlisle broke people like pretzels?

With ease and without con-

science. So many actresses he'd ruined, and there were the two who had killed themselves.

But he had a son who bore his name; even if he didn't like children, there had to be those odd moments when he must feel his mortality, when surely he'd embrace, if only briefly, the thought of a Carlisle dynasty.

But such a forlorn hope, she realized, when he had told the hit man at Number 16 that Rob and Susie were no longer his.

Their executioner had said he would make it soon . . . whatever she tried, it had to be tried soon. Now. Today. Reaching home, she went at once to the telephone directory to look for the number of a Western Union, and then sat down to write a message. It was a feeble one, but she picked up the phone and dictated it, to be sent to Cannon Carlisle at their home address. FOR GOD'S SAKE, CANNON, PLEASE COMMUNICATE, WE MUST, HAVE TO, TALK. And against every feeling she added, LOVE, LUCY, and then withdrew the LOVE, and then put it back again, the word love implying surrender.

Later that afternoon, with Rob and Susie occupied in their room again with Uncle Wiggily, Lucy thought of something else she could do: appeal to the Coccios downstairs, who had surely heard the phone calls in the night, and it was possible might have noticed the man following her, at least once or twice. They could tell the police it was really happening, they could at least vouch for her character and her sanity.





She met them downstairs at the back door as they returned from work, carrying Junior and his bassinet from their pickup truck.

"I wonder," she said with a false calm, "if you could help me?"

"What's up?" asked Harry Senior cheerfully.

"It's those phone calls I've been getting late at night, you must surely have heard them. They waked you?"

Jennifer Coccio nodded. "*That's* for sure."

She gave them an edited version of her trip to the police that morning. "Since the calls disturbed you, too, I wondered if you'd call the police and confirm them."

"What are they, obscene?" asked Harry.

"No, threatening calls."

"Threatening?" he repeated. "Threatening what?"

"Well—threatening my life," she admitted.

He heard this with incredulity. In his world such things didn't happen. On television, yes, but not to a woman in the same house. "You mean, kill you?"

When she nodded, he repeated in horror, "*Kill* you?"

"Did you say *kill*?" echoed his wife, looking frightened.

"It's what the calls said," she told them. "If you could just call the police and verify—complain—"

Jennifer Coccio gasped, "Harry—"

He nodded. "I'm sorry," he told her, and stiffly, not looking at her, he added, "I'm sorry, but we have to think of Junior. If the police can't help—we don't want no trouble." He turned and opened the door to

their apartment and hurried his wife inside, closing the door behind him. Firmly. Leaving Lucy to realize what a fool she'd been, understanding too late that she'd really been hoping for support, sympathy, *help*, and she had only frightened them.

The extent of Lucy's folly became evident the next morning when she glanced down into the yard and saw Harry Coccio carrying two suitcases to his pickup, followed by his wife with a carton of Junior's toys. It can't be, she thought, they're just going for a visit to her mother's, or to spend the day with a high school friend. But Susie was tugging at her arm, reminding her it was Library Day and please couldn't they go now.

"Of course," she told Susie, and resolutely turned away from the window, trying to put aside the uneasiness that she felt.

With the children twice trying the escalator in Bartlett's, and so obviously joyful at the prospect of acquiring new books to read, she remembered the specialness of this day and concentrated on helping them choose books. At least we're not being followed now, she realized, and tried not to remember why.

They were a long time at the library—too long, felt Lucy—and once home again, Lucy hurried to the kitchen window. The pickup truck was still parked in the rear, but now it was fully loaded: it contained Junior's crib, his high chair, and two rolled-up mattresses. She watched them climb into the truck



and drive slowly around the house and some moments later heard the front door open and more sounds of activity. The pickup truck was now parked in the front of the house, and moving to a front window she saw that they were carrying out the two chests of drawers from the hallway.

They were leaving. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, she whispered, and saw that across the street the man who called himself Herbert Fennel had paused to look at the pickup truck and watch them carry out the chests of drawers.

So he too would know they were leaving. I believed I was intelligent, she thought, but just see what panic and desperation can do; it was a terrible mistake she had made, confiding in them, when all she'd accomplished was to frighten them away.

"Where are they going?" asked Rob, joining her at the window.

"I don't know," she said wearily. "Probably a little vacation," she lied to distract him. "Shall I read one of Andersen's fairy tales to you now while you eat your ice cream? We've still got some chocolate syrup, we'll make sundaes out of them."

"Oh boy, yes," he said happily. "Susie, we're going to have sundaes and a fairy tale."

"*'The Princess and The Pea,'*" Susie said firmly. "I want *'The Princess and The Pea.'*"

"No, silly, we've heard that one. Let's hear *'The Tinder Box.'* You know, where the soldier finds the magic tinder box and meets—"

"Ho-Ho doesn't like that one as much," announced Susie, and they

vanished into their bedroom; their argument blurring with distance.

"I'll read them *both*," she called after them, but as she saw the Coccios' pickup truck drive away, she first went down and locked the front door from the inside and then checked the lock on the downstairs back door. She had never felt so alone, the house seemed to scream with emptiness. Just how long do we have, she wondered, and with no one to care, not the police nor the Coccios nor her murderer, nor the father of her children.

With irony she thought of all the careful budgets she'd devised for the next few months when money had so mattered, and checking the cash she'd hidden in her bureau she nodded. Certainly there was no need to budget now, and joining the children in the kitchen she said, "After lunch I think we should visit Bartlett's department store and buy one of those small portable color television sets that we can carry home with us. And watch television tonight."

"TV?" gasped Rob. "Oh-boy, cowboy movies?"

"Mister Rogers and cartoons?" added Susie, her eyes glowing.

"Yes," she said, smiling. "And *Sesame Street* in the morning and lots of cartoons."

It was the first Sunday that she'd not heard the Coccios leave for Mass, or to visit Jennifer's sister or mother, or Harry's mother; and she noticed—as if from a far distance—that her hands trembled as she poured herself a second cup of coffee. Rob and Susie were in the liv-



ing room, momentarily divorced from Uncle Wiggily as they watched cartoons on the television set that had cost two weeks of food money, but she had never seen them so happy. She wished with all her heart that she could feel again some of the joy she'd felt when they arrived here on Greene Street. Why had she insisted on believing that Cannon would never find them, that for once she had outwitted him. She'd been living in a fool's paradise, forgetting what money could buy: clever detectives, paid informers, paid killers. Eight million the man had told her he was being paid: revenge money.

And no one would ever know, the marriage certificate was locked away in his safe, and he could simply destroy it now. She pictured his thin, tan face, the white hair so dramatic against that well-preserved tan, the beak of a nose, the charm that he could exude when it pleased him and the glacial coldness when it didn't. He must for some time have shown signs of the mania that possessed him now, but she had seen him so seldom those past months.

She seated herself at the kitchen table with her cup of coffee and through the side window saw Evva Brossard ensconced on her porch with a newspaper and below her, on the first floor, a woman watering a box of flowers before vanishing inside. With the coffee cup halfway to her lips Lucy put it down, suddenly uneasy because she could hear someone in the basement, the sound coming up through the heat vent, an odd rustling noise followed

by something metallic dropped on the concrete floor. Had the Coccios come back, she wondered. Who could be there, in the basement? Tiptoeing to her kitchen door, she unlocked it and quietly opened it to look down the stairs to the back door.

The back door was wide open.

Someone *was* there. Someone had come in from the yard to enter the door that hadn't been opened since the Coccios left, and the basement door had to be open, too, because the unwrapping sounds were louder now.

The Coccios could have come back, she thought, they could have left something behind in the basement; they could have, she told herself, they *must* have; she closed the door and walked to the window, but there was no pickup truck waiting in the yard. If there was no pickup truck, and the downstairs apartment was empty, then who was in the basement?

Perhaps the landlord, she thought, it had to be the landlord, he'd come to make some repairs, but on a Sunday? There were only the three of them now in the house, and there shouldn't be anyone else.

Turning her head she looked out of the window again at the three balconies at Number 27. Evva Brossard was still seated there, turning pages of a magazine.

I'm edgy, Lucy thought, I've had too much coffee, it couldn't be this soon, surely, but just in case—

She called, "Rob—Susie," and walked into the living room, where they sat mesmerized by their cartoons. She said sharply, "Pick up



your Uncle Wiggily game and go to the—the Rainbow Lady, will you? She's there, I can see her."

"Why?" asked Susie.

"Just go," she told them, and snapped off the television and hurried them into their room to pick up the game. "She's on her porch, you know the way. The second floor."

"But we were watching TV," protested Rob.

She was frightening them now with her urgency. "Yes, yes, I know. Later. Just now—"

"But, Mommy, my shoes," wailed Susie.

She thrust Susie's shoes at her and the Uncle Wiggily game at Rob and hurried them down the long hallway to the frosted-glass door, then down the stairs to the first floor to unlock the front door and open it. With a weak smile she said; "I'll be over shortly. Just go now."

"Mom?" said Rob anxiously as she pushed them out of the door.

"Be my big boy," she told him. "I won't be long."

She closed and locked the heavy front door that could be secured only from the inside and leaned against it for a moment, feeling dizzy from worry, and then she went upstairs, suddenly embarrassed and ashamed of her panic. It couldn't be the man from Number 16, he would have a gun, he would have nothing to do in the basement. With Rob and Susie gone she might even call down the stairs, or even go down there herself, to see if it were the landlord.

She saw that Evva Brossard had left the balcony; she would have heard the children knock. Lucy

picked up her cup for a last sip of coffee and then abruptly put it down because now, whoever had been in the basement, was starting up the back stairs, climbing slowly to her in the kitchen. *Stealthily*, she realized, and very quietly except for the steps that creaked under the weight of a foot on those old stairs. It was like one of those ghost stories told her as a child, which for so long had haunted her as she lay in bed at night . . . the Boogy-Man coming up the stairs at home in Texas, step by step, until suddenly, "Boo—I've got you!" She was too old to scream now, but she felt the same suspense of terror, and with a shock she realized that she'd not locked the kitchen door when she'd opened it a minute ago, and in another minute the door would open and she knew now who it was, it would be *him*, wouldn't it? But so soon? They'd met only forty-eight hours ago, but of course he'd seen the Coccios leaving, she remembered; he would know they were alone.

And she couldn't move. Her heart was hammering, she was feeling the same mind-numbing, white-hot, blinding paralysis of terror from her childhood, but now she knew how it was going to end . . . it was Death walking up the stairs, and trapped in the kitchen like this she had no choice. Once that door opened, he would face the long, long hall to the front of the apartment and if she fled down it, he would see her and shoot her in the back.

I have to move—*try*, she told herself, except I can't, I actually can't move—and thought that surely it



was kinder to face death here in the kitchen and get it over with than to be shot in the back as she ran down the hall. If she had to die—

Another stair creaked. Her well-paid executioner was stalking her now, teasingly, climbing slowly to raise her anxiety. She closed her eyes, trembling, until she thought, I am no longer a child in the night, there has to be some dignity, some pride in me somewhere to meet this. Reach for that pride, damn it, Lucy, she thought angrily, reach for it. Try.

Her anger released the paralysis. She turned and began the long walk down the hall toward the front door, and then she burst into a run, not looking back.

There were two cars parked at the front of the house, and she found refuge behind one of them and knelt, shaken, cold, and trembling. She saw that Evva Brossard had come out to stand on her front porch, and seeing her Lucy cried, "Don't let the children out! Please—please!"

She was sobbing now, and suddenly Evva Brossard was standing beside her, asking no questions but holding her close.

Together they looked up at the house and its second floor windows. As they stood there, a face appeared in the window of Lucy's front bedroom and Lucy, shaken, saw that it was not her killer after all.

"Cannon?" she whispered, and then, "*Cannon?*"

He came, she thought in astonishment. My telegram . . . he's flown here to say—to say—

Cannon was still at the window looking down at the street, a puzzled look on his face, and from somewhere behind him a man was shouting, "What are you doing here? You fool! Get out, there's no time!"

Evva Brossard whispered, "There's someone else up there."

Bewildered, Lucy watched two men struggling, and realized that it was Herbert Fennel trying to wrestle Cannon away from the window, screaming obscenities at him. "Out, damn it, before it's too late. My money, my money!" Pushing aside the screen on the window, he shoved Cannon halfway through the naked window onto the roof of the porch, screaming, still screaming at him, and suddenly Lucy was surrounded by people—where had they all come from?—a crowd watching the two figures wrestling at the front window, and then there came a terrible splintering noise and the house exploded. A window crashed down into the street, the side wall split open and a refrigerator was spewed out, doors open and spilling food, and then came a second explosion.

"Bombs?" whispered Evva Brossard. "Bombs on Greene Street?"

And then Lucy understood. It was the man hired to kill her who had been in the basement, putting together a bomb. *Not* a gun—he'd said he'd be kind and make it fast, why had she expected a gun?

And Cannon . . . the front door had been locked from the inside, but the back door wide open . . . it had been Cannon slowly climbing the stairs as she fled.



Oh God, she thought, hearing police and fire sirens, and she collapsed against the man standing behind her. A voice she'd heard before said, "Steady there, Lucy Brown."

Glancing up at him she gasped, "You?"

Thomas Quinn nodded. "I came back—had to . . . my God, you were right, I only wish I'd come sooner."

Evva Brossard looked him over and apparently liked what she saw. "Whoever you are," she said, "take her into my house. Her children are

there, she's in shock." And to Lucy she added, "It's over now, dear. You're safe."

"Safe," repeated Lucy, dazed.

Thomas Quinn hesitated, looking back at the house in flames. He said, "There was a man trapped in there—"

"Two men," Evva Brossard told him calmly. "Two died," and led them firmly away from the heat and the shouting to the shelter of her apartment, where Susie and Rob would be waiting.

NOTE: Dorothy Gilman is, of course, the author of a long list of novels, among them the hugely popular *Mrs. Pollifax* series in which the grandmotherly Emily Pollifax carries out tasks for the CIA all over the world. The newest book in the series is *Mrs. Pollifax Unveiled—Syria is her destination*. Ms. Gilman's short stories are, however, rare, and we are delighted to have this one for your enjoyment.—ED.



# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the February issue.*

Contrary to popular belief, the safari business is highly competitive. Every guide needs a gimmick, something to entice clients with the promise of a "unique experience."

That explains why Rhino Ronson took in Whirlybird Wilson as a partner. Their real given names were Tom and John, but few acquaintances called them anything but Rhino and Whirlybird. From the latter's small helicopter, clients could view wild animals from above; the opportunities for camera shots were exciting. The only drawback was that only two clients could be airborne at a time.

Ronson & Wilson had six couples in their party for that week. On Sunday Rhino transported them in Land Rovers while Whirlybird flew ahead to set up tents at the campsite. Fat Mr. Quimby grumbled about the rough ride. As the campfire was lighted after supper that night, Fred asked impatiently, "When do we see something?"

Rhino Ronson outlined the schedule for the week. "Each day," he announced, "one couple will fly with Whirlybird to see the animal of their choice at close range. The others I will guide in the area hereabouts. Now, who wants to see which animal?"

"Antelope!" shouted one man.

"No, elephants," declared another.

"How about leopards?"

"I'd rather see lions, real live lions in the wild!"

"We want to look at a herd of wildebeest."

"It's zebras for us!"

Every couple wanted to see a different animal.

Damn, thought Rhino, serves me right for offering them choices. But he and Whirlybird would still make a profit, even though it took extra flying time to reach some of the animals.

(1) Adam and his wife rode aloft in the helicopter the day after Helen and her husband and the day before Mr. and Mrs. Rogers. One of the three couples went up on Wednesday. All were highly enthusiastic about their adventure. "What a thrill!" they all exclaimed.

(2) Carl and his wife (whose last name isn't Newman) went up the

day after the couple seeking leopards. Later in the week (but not the following day) Mr. and Mrs. Parker got their aerial ride.

(3) Adam, Bill, and Carl are married to Inez (who was not interested in zebras), Mrs. Quimby, and the woman who saw elephants from aloft.

(4) Dave, Mr. Parker, and Lola (with their spouses) were seeking antelope, lions, and wildebeest.

(5) Judy rode with Whirlybird the day after Bill's wife and the day before the woman who viewed the zebra herd. Their last names are McCord, Newman, and O'Dell. None of the three couples went up on Friday.

(6) Inez, Kathy, and Lola are married to Evan, Mr. O'Dell, and the man who wanted to photograph antelope.

(7) The day after Greta rode in the helicopter, the couple who chose to see lions went up.

One of the wives did her best to spoil the safari for everyone else. She constantly carped the whole week: "This is no fun . . . I could see smelly animals in any zoo . . . I only came to satisfy my stupid husband . . ." On and on she complained. The other five couples felt sorry for the poor guy, but what could they do? Yet even the safari leaders had no inkling how tragically it would end.

Saturday, the last day of the safari, dawned. The helicopter went aloft and returned near sunset. Without warning, the disgruntled woman grabbed Rhino's rifle and shot her husband point-blank.

The woman who had delighted in photographing leopards remarked, "She must be insane—absolutely mad!"

"She certainly is," agreed Kathy.

As Ronson prepared to leave in a Land Rover to inform the ranger of the murder, he muttered to his partner, "I'd like to lose her out there in lion territory some dark night," and waved his hand toward the horizon beyond the grassy veldt.

*Who was the unsettled woman who  
shot her husband?*

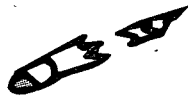
*What animals had the unfortunate man  
come to see?*



## **SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":**

Bart Turner, the croupier, stabbed Alvin Ulmer, the manager, in the casino.

| FLOOR | HUSBAND      | WIFE  | POSITION | CHECK DAY |
|-------|--------------|-------|----------|-----------|
| 11    | Frank Staley | Kitty | credit   | Wednesday |
| 10    | Chuck Palmer | Helen | dealer   | Friday    |
| 9     |              |       |          |           |
| 8     | Danny Ruskin | Molly | cashier  | Monday    |
| 7     | Alvin Ulmer  | Irene | manager  | Sunday    |
| 6     | George Quirk | Lorna | bouncer  | Thursday  |
| 5     |              |       |          |           |
| 4     | Eddie Osmund | Jenny | auditor  | Tuesday   |
| 3     | Bart Turner  | Nancy | croupier | Saturday  |



.....

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"UNSOLVED"

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FICTION

# THE LAST LETTER

Mike Wiecek

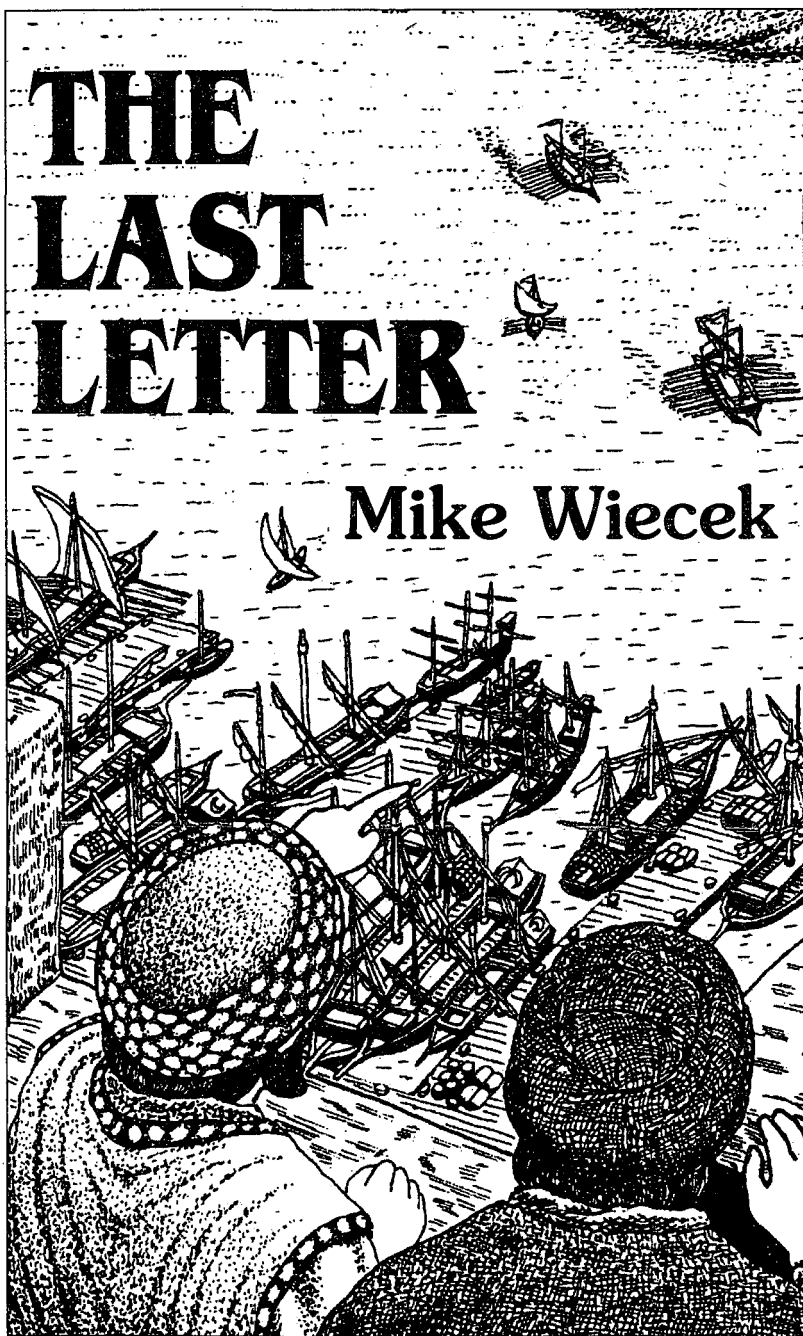


Illustration by David Fielding

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1/02

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**T**he letter arrived from Constantinople in the baggage of a Balkan peddler, and Vruho held it next to his heart until he had time to visit the priest, who could read. It was early spring, the hungry season. Vruho had not seen his first son for three decades; in that time he'd received perhaps two dozen letters.

"Konstantiniyye, the seventeenth day of Safer, year 1571 . . . blessings to the elder Vruho of Albania." The priest looked up. "It's not from Ozaner himself, it was hired from some letter-writer in the bazaar."

Despite a steady rain they sat outside, under a thatched eave of the priest's house. Lamp oil was too dear to waste while it was still light out. Vruho wore several layers of rough cloth, between which he had pushed hay and dried moss. The priest's robe and cloak were of finer quality, but they apparently failed to keep him as warm, for he shivered now and then as he grumbled his way through the translation.

"There's a great deal of flowery language. Formalities, with no real meaning. Court Turkish gets harder and harder to understand all the time . . . or maybe I'm simply getting old." He read silently for a while, his lips moving, then suddenly stiffened.

"What is it?"

The priest glared at the damp paper. "It's so hard to understand this language . . . but the meaning seems to be . . . I think . . ." He stopped and glanced at Vruho, then back down. "I am so sorry, my friend."

Vruho missed his meaning for a moment, then sagged in shock.

"Resul dead not four months," he whispered finally. "My wife, and now my son."

The priest was working his way through the rest of the letter. "I can only get a general sense. This was sent by someone who knew Ozaner, a seller of . . . wheat? Biscuits? Something like that. He is conveying sympathy."

"It does not come from the court?" Vruho caught his breath. "But he was a *kapikulu*, only three ranks below the Grand Vizier himself! And a street merchant sends the news?"

"The merchant is Albanian, too; they knew each other," said the priest. "He seems to talk of politics. I cannot follow the details. It does not say why Ozaner died." He continued to study the letter in silence, but Vruho was now elsewhere.

"I am fifty-three," he said at last. "My father's father could remember the last battles, when the Turks conquered us, when Scanderbeg fell. He told me stories . . . but it was the proudest day of my life when the tribute convoy came through, and the officer selected Ozaner alone. You remember how Dzan tried to substitute his own son, sneaking him onto the wagon? But it was Ozaner they wanted, the finest boy." His face was wet, perhaps from the rain.

The priest finally put aside the letter. "You are proud of your other sons, who now farm their own land and have two cows."



"My younger sons are their own men. With Resul gone, there is nothing for me here."

The priest objected, but Vruho silenced him. "Why did he die?"

"The letter does not say."

"Then I will go to Constantinople."

The priest stared, then looked at the road, a meandering mud wallow this time of year, almost impassable.

Vruho shrugged. "The peddler manages," he said.

"But why?"

"I will go to the city, and discover why he died, so young. Then I may die in peace myself."

"Ozaner is with God, no matter if he converted." The priest had never bothered much with dogma; many of the villagers still propitiated tree spirits, constructed simple charms of colored stone, followed his services with boisterous pagan ritual. Islam was just another distraction. "You are my friend, but you would embark on a fool's errand," he said sadly.

The village was deserted in the dismal afternoon; it was too early for planting and too wet for anything else. The inhabitants would be huddled together under their scant blankets, hungry, thinking about the crusts of rock-stale barley bread that would be their day's meal. Vruho and the priest sat while the rain fell and darkness settled in.

"He was a court official of the highest stature, and his death ought not pass in this mysterious, furtive way," said Vruho finally. "I must know the truth."

He left on foot two days later, some bread and clothing in a tied cloth over one shoulder, in his pouch a small amount of precious tea from the priest. It would have been faster to go west, to descend the mountains to Durazzo and take passage by sea, but he had only a little money. He trudged slowly along the mud-choked roads, rising at dawn and stopping when it grew dark, begging vegetables here and there, sometimes buying mutton or olives, sleeping outside when it was safe enough to do so.

After two weeks he saw no more of the round stone houses of Albania, which were replaced by low wooden buildings. He learned a few words of Turkish, most usefully how to say *chok pahali*: "That's too expensive!"

One wet night in the bandit-infested reaches south of Plovdiv he shared a room at a *han* with a pair of merchants from Chios. The hostel was a dismal collection of huts off the road, with nothing but filthy straw on the dirt floor for bedding and an excess of bugs and lice. The Chians spoke several languages between them, including Albanian. Together they purchased salt, garlic, and hard cheese from the hosteler and in their freezing hovel talked of the Empire.

"You did not hear of the battle of Lepanto?" asked the older Chian. "Last autumn, the first defeat of the Ottoman navy in two centuries, two hundred ships sunk by the Spanish and Italians. A disaster for the Turks."





In the next hut a team of muleteers was drinking and arguing. Their animals were tethered close by, braying now and then as they rooted in piles of muck.

"Sailors and soldiers have been trickling back for months, those who weren't captured," said the other Chian. "There is unrest in the Court. The Sultan is worthless—the Drunkard is what people call him. But Sokullu the Grand Vizier is a wily old master and remains in control."

"For how long?" asked the first. "Sokullu served the previous Sultan well, but he has made vast new enemies. It was his attack on Cyprus the year before that brought the westerners together against him, and this led to the fleet's destruction at Lepanto. He has earned the enmity of all of Christendom."

"I thought the Sultan ruled the Empire," said Vruho. "Is it not his face on the coins?" He felt in his pouch for one of his few silver *aspers* but did not pull it out.

"The Sultan is too remote," said the Chian. "The Grand Vizier governs in actuality, and it is true Sokullu has lost a major battle against the west. But what matters more is how he fares among the politics of the Court itself. The defection of Sokullu's supporters as they move to other factions—that is what really matters." He hawked and spat. "Those in Constantinople see themselves at the center of the world; they give little attention to those outside its walls." His tone was peevish.

"We have had difficulties with the tariff," explained the younger Chian. "Ever since Chios was subjugated five years ago, minor functionaries have found it convenient to extract more and more taxes from our trade. They are strangling the very commerce on which their Empire is built." He scratched at his lice in annoyance. "We have not always had to travel this way."

They shared the cheese.

"We see many Albanians in the city," said the first merchant. He looked at Vruho. "What, if I may ask, takes you from the mountains?"

"A relative," said Vruho, unwilling to share his sorrow with strangers.

"You've, ah, not been to Constantinople before?"

"No. What may I expect?"

The Chian laughed. "I could not begin to tell you."

The days grew warmer and longer as Vruho progressed eastward. In Khaskovo he slept beneath plum trees in ephemeral bloom, waking to find himself covered with pink and white petals. The lowlands were now densely cultivated, small fields separated by walls of piled stone and bracken. The roads became crowded: farmers with carts of manure and hay, commercial caravans, imperial messengers at a gallop, groups of soldiers, monks in belted gowns and wound headgear. Once a troop of janissaries strode past beneath yellow and red banners, carrying scimitars and arquebuses, disdaining the other traffic.



"See their tattoos?" Vruho had fallen in with the speaker, another Albanian, for the last two days; he was an agricultural foreman who had gone up to Edirne to settle a tax dispute with the provincial bureaucracy. He pointed. "On their legs and shoulders . . . their regimental symbol."

"They march with such discipline," said Vruho.

"Hardly." The man frowned. "Some are little better than brigands nowadays. What is the Sultan thinking? He fails to pay them, so they take directly from the citizens. Once started, it is a difficult habit to stop. I have seen them kill a man in the street because he had the courage to demand they pay for what they'd drunk in his inn. Stabbed him down and walked away laughing . . . is it any wonder the Empire rots from within?"

"Surely not all are corrupt."

"No, you're right. The Albanian regiments are better than most."

"Do they oppose the Court?"

"Who knows? The Grand Vizier is said to be all-powerful, but that sort of politics is a mystery to me. You are going to Constantinople? You can ask there. Of course you'll want to be cautious. When a royal suffers the cord around his neck, bells toll in the deep night as his body is pushed off the seawall." He looked at Vruho's worn clothing. "You they'd dump in the gutter."

He could see the city long before he finally arrived at its gates, a dense offsetting of walls and domes and towers that gradually resolved out of the haze. Minarets were dark against the brilliant blue of the Sea of Marmara beyond; cypress trees were luxuriant, green against the white walls. Inside, along the crooked, crowded streets, he was overwhelmed. Most lanes were little more than cobbled alleys, an arm's-breadth wide; everywhere the buildings were pushed higher and closer together, to pack more in.

He showed passersby the letter, folded to reveal the originator's name and address, and followed their pointing when they responded in Turkish. Eventually he came to a street of bakers. It was close enough to the water that he could smell salt spray and fish at the head of the lane, but as he walked past the low doorways, the aroma of fresh bread was overpowering.

His destination was a shop smaller than most, a single room with a blackened oven occupying one wall and a harried man rapidly rolling out flatbreads and slapping them onto clay tiles above the fire. Flour dust had drifted over the floor and table. He seemed shocked when Vruho showed him the letter.

"Let me finish this batch," he said in accented Albanian and returned to work until the last breads had been piled into baskets.

They stood outside the doorway, away from the heat of the oven.

"You came all the way from the mountains?" the baker said in disbelief.



"Ozaner was my son," said Vruho.

Women in colored shawls and jackets, hair covered or not depending on ethnicity, queued at preferred windows for the day's flatbreads. Men departed with trays of *ka'kat* rolls balanced on their heads, to sell on street corners around the city.

"But . . . he is dead. I am sorry; what can I do for you?"

"I wish to know how he died."

The baker seemed at a loss. "I don't know—he had enemies in the Court, events overtook him, he ended up on the wrong side in some dispute."

"A dispute with whom?"

"I could not say." The baker shook his head. "I was—his friend. But I know little of politics. I want to know nothing."

He offered a leavened flatbread baked with black onion seed, and Vruho ate gratefully.

"You are hungry," said the baker.

"It was a long journey."

"I wish I could . . . but there is nothing." He seemed distraught and turned away. "I must return to work. I have an order to fill for a janissaries' canteen."

"I'm sorry, I don't mean this the wrong way," said Vruho. "But I must ask: Ozaner was a high-ranking *kapikulu*. He was six when he was taken from our village, and he was reared in the Sultan's world. He wrote letters . . . he oversaw matters of importance I cannot even imagine. How did he become friends with—I mean, a man such as yourself is not likely to come into contact with the Sultan's entourage . . ." He stopped, embarrassed.

The baker shook his head. "We are Albanian, no? There is an Albanian janissary regiment, with two men from my village. It is good to speak with one's countrymen now and again. Ozaner—" The name came awkwardly. "Ozaner knew these men also, and we met that way."

"I will talk to the janissaries," said Vruho after the baker said nothing more.

"That is not possible."

"Please," said Vruho. "I have come a long way."

The baker shook his head, briefly unable to speak. "I can do nothing," he said finally. "I am sorry." He suddenly turned and entered the tiny shop, stumbling on the stone lintel. "Go," he called.

Vruho nodded and walked away. But where the street narrowed, he stepped behind a pillar and stopped, obscured from the baker's view by sacks of flour heaped against the wall.

It was not long before a boy pulling a small barrow appeared, pushing his way through the flowing crowd and halting before the baker's doorway. Vruho was too far away to hear, but he watched as they loaded up the barrow with stacks of flatbreads. They finished quickly, and the bak-

er returned to his oven. After a moment Vruho stepped out and followed the boy some twenty paces back as he pulled the barrow away.

The boy trundled steadily along, following a course generally uphill and ignoring the crowds around him. They passed through a weavers' district with looms clacking behind narrow doorways and bolts of brightly colored cloth overflowing tables into the street. Outside a bathhouse the boy looked up long enough to shout a greeting at someone; Vruho could hear splashing and distorted voices echoing from the stone chambers within.

They neared the Sultan's palace, the Topkapi, and the boy turned down a side alley to arrive at a wide, arched gate in a high wall. The massive iron doors were open, and a pair of guards in brilliant white hats and red boots, each with a polished dirk and scimitar, prevented casual entry.

The boy was nodded through, but they dismissed Vruho.

"No, you cannot wander around inside the quarters," said one, eyeing Vruho's tattered and grimy outfit. "Be off." But he spoke in Albanian, and Vruho merely went around the corner to wait again. He'd expected the dismissal, just as he'd expected that the baker's delivery would be to the same regiment that had been his connection to Ozaner.

As dusk fell, a small group of soldiers emerged, walking and joking with a casual air that suggested they were off duty. Vruho followed them to a public house nearby marked by a faded wooden sign in the shape of a rooster. Most of the men inside wore white caps, plain kilts, and long tunics decorated with brightly colored thread. Vruho could hear only Albanian in the hubbub of conversation and shouted orders, which two serving boys rushed about to fill.

He found it easy to strike up a conversation, happy to be surrounded by his countrymen, who either didn't care that he was dressed like a pauper or couldn't see clearly in the smoky haze.

"Ozaner? It's not a familiar name," said one of the soldiers after Vruho worked the conversation around. "But it's Turkish, is it not?"

"It was changed when he was taken up by the tribute officer," said Vruho, a sudden pang in his heart. "He was reared for the Sultan's service . . . after all this time it's how I know him."

"That's how most of us got here, too. They recruit in the mountains, since they know we're the strongest, the toughest, the best hunters."

"But what could have happened to him?"

The janissary frowned. "The Court seethes with intrigue and politics. They waste their time fighting over pointless slights while the Empire begins to crumble. Sokullu has been Grand Vizier for six years—but he does not put the Empire first. We should never have lost the fleet at Lepanto."

His companion interrupted. "It doesn't matter. We'll rebuild our ships faster than the west, and we'll come out even stronger—like Sokullu himself."

"True, he's landed on his feet again, seems like." The janissary drained



his clay mug and waved it at the serving boy, who nodded distractedly and continued back to the kitchen. "After Lepanto, our officer received inquiries from certain members of the Court, he wouldn't say who. They were suggesting a . . . a realignment is what they called it. If they could turn enough of the janissary regiments against Sokullu, they could replace him. Wisely, our officer refused."

"We cannot get sucked into Court manipulations," said the other soldier. "We would never win, for the games always continue."

"In any event, Sokullu discovered the plot and crushed his opponents before they achieved anything. In fact, it was probably the plot itself that gave Sokullu the excuse he needed."

Vruho had drunk almost none of the fermented goat's milk in his mug. "What do you mean, crushed?"

"Bowstrung them," said the janissary, briefly putting his fingers to his neck. "Then tossed them into the sea. The usual end." He paused. "Well, that's what we hear, anyway."

"That's not always what happens," objected his companion. "Sometimes they jump in themselves. The dishonor is great."

They were silent, and the serving boy brought another mug, accepting the janissary's coins and counting them with his fingers, not looking, as he moved on to the next table.

"There are Albanians among the Court," said the janissary eventually, "like your Ozaner. They sometimes gather along the promenade above the upper walls, where the sea wind is fresh and the oppression of the Court seems far away. We talk to them, time to time, since we are all brothers."

"Thank you," said Vruho.

He spent the night in an Albanian hostel. After dark he was astonished at how quickly the streets emptied, how quiet the city became.

"Everyone returns to their own district," said the hostel's proprietress as she laboriously recorded Vruho's name in her ledger. "Each guild keeps to themselves. Don't you go wandering around—the guard will have questions. There's food at the corner." He ate tripe cooked on a street vendor's brazier, seasoned in chili and lime, and listened to the chatter of frogs in a garden behind the wall.

He found the promenade in the morning, and on the sixth day he met a man in brocaded pantaloons, a silk vest, and a cap embroidered with blue and black. They leaned on the worn parapet and watched ships slowly enter and leave the forest of masts along the wharves far below. Gulls cawed in the stiff breeze, and Vruho felt the sun's warmth steal through his hat.

"I was taken when I was five years old," said the man. "They raised us in a rural commune, to learn Turkish and to grow strong working in the fields. After that we continued in school here in Constantinople."



"The same for Ozaner," said Vruho. "Though his first letters didn't arrive for eight years, and by then he was already in service at the Court."

"He chose the wrong side," said the official. "I'm sorry."

"Some sort of conflict with the Grand Vizier as I've been told." Vruho shrugged, staring down at his hands. "It doesn't matter."

"Just more politics." The official sighed. "Sometimes I tire of it myself."

"I cannot tell you how proud we were of him," said Vruho. "For a boy of no background, no connections, no wealth, to go from the poverty of the mountains to the heights of power at the very heart of the Empire—it was like he rose into the heavens."

A vendor walking past offered bits of cooked offal to feed the stray dogs wandering about; the official made a negative gesture.

"I only wish . . ." Vruho started, stopped, started again. "I just don't understand why the notification had to come from a friend of Ozaner's, not from the Court itself. Was there no funeral?"

The official looked surprised. "No, of course not. Ozaner just disappeared—that's what usually happens. Rumor, innuendo, and then one morning his chamber was empty."

"But the janissaries said—"

"They know nothing." The official waved one hand dismissively.

They watched the sea. Cloud shadows scudded across the choppy water, easily outpacing even those ships in full sail.

"You are fortunate that he wrote," said the official finally. "Many of us leave our early life behind completely. It is like a dream, soon forgotten."

"Yes," said Vruho. "I am grateful for that."

He walked around the city for another day, through the teeming markets, past the mosques, along the quiet and forbiddingly high walls in the expensive residential areas. He was jostled, solicited, beseeched, excused, noticed in passing, ignored; but he passed through oblivious. That night he slept poorly and awoke at the false dawn, two hours before sunrise. It was a matter of moments to gather together his belongings and depart the hostel.

The bakers' street was already busy, men pounding out large bowls of dough, slow-starting the oven fires, haggling with flour vendors at their carts in the dark streetway. Vruho found his baker at the table evaluating a batter frothy with yeast in the dim light of a lamp hung from the wall.

"I have come again," he said, and the baker looked up in surprise.

"I have talked to many people," Vruho continued. "Some who knew Ozaner, some who know the Court and its politics. It took me much longer than it should have to realize the truth . . . but after all, I haven't seen him since he was a child."

"He is dead," said the baker.

"No," said Vruho. "Dishonored, yes, much more so than I can under-





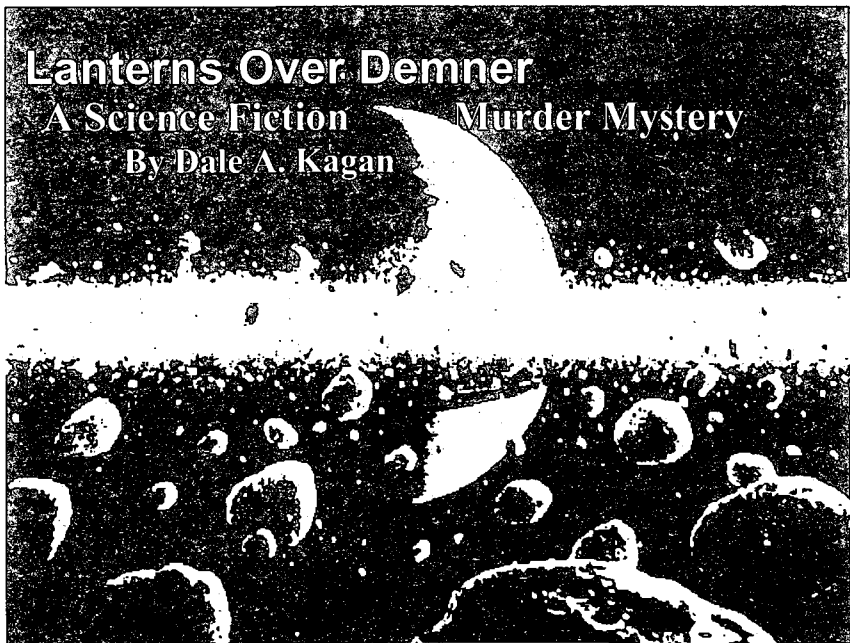
stand, really. What difference does it make that he was on the losing side of some factional argument? It seems a matter of little consequence—but in the Court it is apparently all of one's existence. He had to leave, and to leave the Court is to leave life itself."

The baker was silent.

"But where did he go?" Vruho stepped forward. "He would not have killed himself, no Albanian would. But he could not keep any connection with his former position. He had to find a way to support himself—probably through his janissary friends, though none would admit it to me. So he established himself in a far more humble life . . . and he notified his father that he had died because, in some sense, he had."

Vruho reached out to clasp the baker's arm. "Ozaner, your father has walked three months to see you. I care nothing for who you were in the Court. Please . . ."

And after a moment the baker raised his head, tears flowing slowly down his face.



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FICTION

# TOOL AND DIE

John H. Dirckx



Illustration by Dan Krovatin

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1/02

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“**V**aughan! Hey, Vaughan!” Rance’s voice, raised to be heard above the roar and clatter of machinery, carried an unmistakable note of bullying and even contempt.

Lowell Vaughan looked up from his machine to see Rance, the second-shift foreman, framed in the doorway of his office.

“You take your next break in here with me,” called Rance.

Vaughan eyed him blankly, a feat for which he was admirably equipped by nature. “How come?”

“Attendance records. Et cetera.” Rance stepped back into the office and let the door slam behind him.

Vaughan went on with his mindless and monotonous work, muttering vague curses to the crashing rhythm of the press before him.

In the comparative quiet of his air-conditioned office, Herman Rance finished documenting the night’s work assignments for Department 81. Four men had called in sick—about par for a Monday—and of the ones who had shown up, three had temporary work restrictions, for medical reasons, that limited the jobs to which they could rotate.

He turned his attention to the first-shift production records. Number six press had been down for repairs since ten o’clock that morning. In consequence, the output of eight- and fifteen-millimeter sleeve bearings had been only about twenty-five percent of shift quota. If that press weren’t going to be up and running again by nine tonight, one whole assembly line would have to be shut down on the third shift.

Rance went over his figures again and then left the office to check personally on the progress of the repair.

The ringing of the telephone brought Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn back from a stint as a bus driver in a rain forest to the world of reality, where his bedside clock stood at twelve thirty A.M.

Lieutenant Groll, the watch commander, wasted no time on idle words. “The coroner’s investigator has a suspicious death out at Quintilian Corporation,” he told Auburn. “He thinks it looks like an accident, but their safety people aren’t buying it. Main plant. Go in by the public entrance on Route 5. Plant security’s expecting you.”

In fifteen minutes Auburn was dressed and on his way.

Quintilian Corporation was an enormous factory complex west of town. For decades it had been growing steadily larger, sprawling across tracts of former farmland, blocking urban expansion, and discharging malodorous fumes day and night. But because it had also become an increasingly potent force in the regional economy, it had thus far successfully thwarted the efforts of city planners and environmentalists to curb its growth.

Auburn parked in the public lot outside the main gate, where a thin November mist muted the glare of banked floodlights, and walked to the guardhouse. A sign informed him that alcohol, drugs, firearms, and explosives were not permitted on the premises and that all per-

sons entering or leaving the facility were subject to search. He wondered if the prohibition of firearms extended to police officers and decided it was just as well that he'd left his weapon locked in the glove box of his car.

A security officer buzzed him through the electrically controlled door and another, whose nametag read GRISWOLD, met him inside.

Auburn showed identification.

"I didn't figure you was the milkman," said Griswold. "You wear glasses?"

"Not after the sun goes down."

"Put these on." He took a pair of safety glasses with clear plastic frames from a bin under the counter and handed them to Auburn.

He led the way across a lobby adorned with promotional posters and displays of products in glass cases and then along a corridor flanked by darkened offices and meeting rooms. "They get you out of bed for this?"

"Oh yes. What's the story?"

"They found a foreman on one of the lines with his head caved in." Griswold's determined waddle threw the long-barreled revolver, flashlight, and cell phone on his belt into violent agitation and made his ring of keys jingle like Santa's sleighbells. "Looks to me like he lost a fight with one of the robots, but the safety director's trying to make out that somebody bashed him."

The drive to the factory had roused Auburn to a state of semi-wakefulness, but he still didn't feel equal to the task of weighing the seriousness of this remark about ro-

bots. "Do you have much trouble with violence here?"

"Not much. Our main job is keeping down pilfering and sabotage and escorting drunks and coke-heads off the premises. And in our spare time we try to keep the red-necks from doing body work on imported cars out in the parking lot with a sledgehammer."

By this time they had entered the factory proper and were walking across a gritty concrete floor among enormous thudding machines and racks and bins of parts. Heat engulfed Auburn like a blanket. Acrid fumes that suggested both burning tires and rotting vegetables hung so potently in the air that he could taste them as well as smell them.

They passed a lounge area equipped with soft drink machines and picnic tables, where a crowd of workers hunched in somber inactivity and observed their passage with apparent suspicion and disapproval. Some notion of the size of the place was borne in upon Auburn when he realized that they had been walking for nearly ten minutes before they reached their destination. Long before then he had taken off his jacket and slung it over his shoulder.

They came to a department where all the machinery was stilled and little knots of workers stood around idle. Nick Stamaty, the corner's investigator, was talking to a man with a flashlight and a clipboard. On the floor near them an inert form lay under a blanket. Griswold turned and jangled away in the direction of the guard post.

Stamaty's jowls were blue and he too had shed his jacket in the oppressive heat, but otherwise he looked as dapper and self-possessed as usual.

"Morning, Cy."

"Whatever you say."

The man with the clipboard nodded a little stiffly. "Ken Gerault," he said. "Safety Director. Detective ..."

"Auburn."

"Got a queer situation here. Around ten o'clock tonight the foreman of this department—second-shift foreman, name's Herman Rance—was found dead with severe head injuries. Nobody knows what happened, or if they do, they're not owning up to it. But right away the guys in the department started blaming it on a robot. I guarantee that's utter nonsense, but I can also guarantee that somebody's already called the regional OSHA hotline about it."

Gerault was in his mid-forties. He had evidently jumped into his summer-weight suit in haste, thrusting a tie into the side pocket of his jacket and forgetting to put it on. The suit contrasted oddly with his safety shoes and work gloves. There was a pronounced quiver in his voice. Very likely his job would be on the line if the federal authorities blamed the death on negligence or a breach of safety rules.

"Do you actually use robots in the factory?"

Gerault nodded past Auburn's left shoulder. "If it were a rattlesnake, we'd all be goners."

It didn't look like the android contraptions of science fiction, with

lightbulbs for eyes and little wheels for feet. In fact, it didn't have any feet—just arms, six of them, mounted on a squat base and surrounded by a sturdy chest-high steel cage.

"That guy," Gerault told them, "can pick up a piece of tube stock, trim it to length with an electric arc, raise a flange on one end, and grind the end face to a mirror finish, all in three seconds flat with a tolerance of two hundredths of a millimeter. And he was still dancing in time with the music when we shut him down. He didn't suddenly decide to reach out here and clobber Rance."

Auburn was waking up amid the heat, fumes, and ceaseless, mind-shattering noise from adjacent departments. He looked around him to fix the details of the scene in his mind.

Thirty feet overhead was a flat roof of corrugated iron supported by endless rows of steel posts placed at regular intervals. From the roof hung dozens of floodlights, also at regular intervals. Massive, complicated machinery stood on all sides amid a labyrinthine tangle of cables and ductwork. Everything was shiny under many coats of enamel, with glossier highlights where oil and grease had splashed or dribbled. Safety lanes were marked on the floor in yellow paint.

He stooped and uncovered the body, which lay on its back in the attitude approved for the lately departed with wrists crossed over the navel. The late Herman Rance was wearing a shortsleeved dress shirt, slacks, and a prefabricated bow tie. No human arm had swung what-

ever had struck the back of his head.

Auburn replaced the blanket carefully. "Where exactly was the body found?"

Stamaty pointed.

"Right over there," he said. "According to Vaughan, the guy who found him."

"Where is Vaughan now?"

"In the office with the third-shift foreman. He says he came along from that direction and found Rance lying right about here with his legs down in that hole."

The hole was a pit about four feet square, surrounded on three sides by a safety railing. On the fourth side a steel ladder, its upper end secured to a roof post, led down into the dark interior.

"What's down there?"

"That's a sump. Catches liquid waste that runs into it through those channels in the floor. You've got twenty-five, thirty grades of grease and oil dripping off these machines, you've got steam and vapor condensate, you've got coolant and water lines springing leaks, you've got leaks from the roof—"

"So it leads where? Down into the sewer?"

"Oh no. It's just a blind trap. A regular maintenance crew goes around and cleans out the sumps with hot water and puts the waste through an environmentally safe disposal process."

"No reason for Rance to be down there tonight?"

"None that I can think of unless he dropped his wedding ring and went looking for it."

Auburn had already observed

that Rance wasn't wearing any rings and hadn't done so recently. He shone his flashlight down the sump and estimated its depth at eight feet.

"Do we know when he was last seen alive?"

"No, sir. And you can't see this spot from any of the work stations in the department. But according to Plant Protection's records, the second-shift guard came through here at nine forty on his rounds, and he didn't see anything out of line."

"What's in there?" asked Auburn, pointing to an enclosure with a darkened window facing them.

"Tool Room Number 5. Skilled workers, first shift only. Nobody in there after four P.M."

"And what's this?"

A massive device looking something like an aircraft engine hung by a chain from a heavy-duty overhead track just a yard or so from the sump where the body had been found.

"That's the guts out of a stamping press that went down on first shift yesterday. Maintenance has parts for it coming by air express."

"What are the possibilities that that's what hit Rance?"

Gerault didn't like that idea any better than the one about the robot. "Pretty close to nil, I'd say. That's strictly a mechanical pulley and track system—no motor, no remote control. You've got three, four tons of dead weight hanging there. Far too much inertia to get it moving fast enough to bash his head in. And he didn't just accidentally bump into it, either. Not with the amount of damage he's got."



"I saw fork lifts working inside a dock where we came in . . ."

"Shouldn't have been any lift trucks in this aisle. It's too narrow. And they're all equipped with beepers." He added, somewhat inconsequentially, "Rance never saw what hit him."

Auburn peered upward. "Could he have fallen from somewhere up there?"

"I guess so, but what would he have been doing up there? Only maintenance guys climb. And how'd he get up there? Go up that chain like a monkey?"

Auburn took another look at the stilled robot. Its stark, cold beauty was marred slightly by the puddles of murky oil on the floor beneath it and the scattering of scrap in the form of steel rings, some of which had bounced or rolled into the safety lane. Its six arms, each terminating in a hydraulically controlled "hand," radiated from a central turret. It was easy to imagine the device in operation, picking up pieces of stock from a bin on the left, carrying them to three specialized tools in sequence, and dropping the finished parts into a bin on the right. It was also easy to imagine the destruction one of those arms could do if somebody got in its way.

Both Stamaty and Gerault seemed to be waiting for him to make some kind of decision. Even the workers loitering at a distance were watching with an expectant air.

"Well," said Auburn, "speaking strictly without benefit of coffee, I think you've got some kind of accident here." Stamaty, standing

where Gerault couldn't see him, nodded assent. "But if you aren't comfortable with that, I can look around some more, talk to some people, call in an evidence technician."

Gerault edged closer.

"What will an evidence technician do?"

"Take pictures, collect trace evidence, and look for a weapon."

"A weapon?"

Gerault's attitude was getting annoying.

"Well, yes. If this wasn't an accident, that means we're looking for a killer and a weapon. Did Rance have enemies in the factory? Any particular discipline problems recently? Any bad feelings, fights, threats?"

Gerault shrugged helplessly.

"He was a foreman," was all he said.

"How many people reported to him?"

"Twenty-eight, when they all showed up for work. Which was never."

"And where are they all now?"

"We sent everybody home except the man who found him."

Auburn nodded. "Did I see a coffee machine back down the hall?"

Stamaty pulled a thermos bottle out of his field kit. "Espresso's quicker," he said.

The man who had found the body had already been grilled by both Gerault and Stamaty and was now waiting in the foreman's office to be interviewed again by Auburn. The third-shift foreman, Dahlinghaus, whose entire work force had been idled by the shutdown of Depart-

ment 81, turned the office over to Auburn.

Auburn couldn't remember any prior occasion when he'd been grateful for air-conditioning a week before Thanksgiving. The office was a ten foot square box of painted plywood with windows that looked out into the plant in two directions. On the desk stood an aged computer with a table of figures on its dusty screen and a thick layer of dirt on each key.

He took the chair at the desk and, noting that the other man wasn't wearing safety glasses, removed his, which kept sliding down his nose on a film of sweat.

"Mr. Vaughan? Sergeant Auburn."

He showed Vaughan identification.

"Are you saved, brother?" Vaughan was in his forties, a wizened, shaggy man in a faded orange coverall. His nails were cracked and split, his palms silvery gray with embedded grime. His safety shoes had left streaks and blobs of black dirt on the floor in front of his chair.

"I'm sorry?" said Auburn.

"Babylon the Great has fallen. Have you been washed in the blood of the Lamb?"

Auburn took another sip of Stamaty's espresso. "I don't want to keep you over any longer than necessary," he said. "Can you just tell me what happened tonight?"

"Don't know what happened." Vaughan screwed his face into a knot and stared at Auburn in silent defiance.

"I understand you found the body? Around ten o'clock?"

"Pretty near."

"Could you just describe what you saw?"

Getting information out of Lowell Vaughan was like squeezing the oil out of a handful of nuts and bolts. He'd been returning from his second break when he noticed the body of a man lying motionless, half in and half out of the drainage sump, with an obviously fatal head wound. Only after he'd raised the alarm had he realized that the dead man was his foreman, Herman Rance.

"When was the last time you saw him alive?"

"About six thirty."

"And where was that?"

"Right here. He was laying what he called counseling on me, about all the days I missed last month. And telling me he was going to suspend me again if I didn't quit distributing tracts in the factory. Which shows you what a broken reed he was."

"I guess you didn't get along with him very well?"

"You could say that. Herman Rance was a halfway decent guy when he hired in here as a machine operator. But after they made him a foreman, he turned into a snake."

"Did a lot of people in the department have trouble with him?"

Vaughan had a way of squinting suddenly when he heard something he didn't expect or didn't like, as if a light had been flashed into his face.

"You could say that."

"Any idea what hit him?"

"Sure. Robot. They'll swear up and down it wasn't. But no mortal

hand struck him down." This last remark echoed Auburn's own view exactly. He let Vaughan go home after accepting two tracts and promising to take a look at them at his earliest convenience.

As soon as he was alone in the office, Auburn used the phone on the desk to call headquarters. "It's about like you said, lieutenant," he told Groll. "Looks like an accident to Stamaty and me, but we can't quite figure how it happened, and they want us to go ahead with a homicide investigation." Groll told him to carry on and promised to send an evidence technician.

The door to the office opened and a man in his sixties stepped in and closed it behind him. "See you a minute, officer?" he asked, but there was nothing tentative or diffident in his manner. Although he sat down in the chair that Vaughan had just vacated, it was obvious that he had already taken control of this interview. "I'm Reinhard, the works manager." He didn't offer to shake hands, and he pretended not to see the badge Auburn pulled out. "What have you got so far?"

"Not much. I just got here a few minutes ago."

Reinhard nodded his massive gray head sagely.

"I saw you drive in. Wanted to give you some time to get oriented. What do you think?"

Auburn ran his eye quickly over the man before him. A tropical tan, a suit that glowed like neon under the fluorescent lights, imported shoes, no damaged fingernails. Everything about him trumpeted wealth, power, and social status.

"The coroner's investigator and I both thought it looked like an accident, but I haven't had time to come to any conclusions yet," he said. "An evidence technician is on the way, and I'll be checking around the department for the next couple of hours."

"Checking around, talking to the people?"

"Yes, sir. But I understand most of the people who were here when Rance died have gone home for the night."

"Exactly. If we'd kept them over, we would have had to pay them overtime, just like we're paying our third-shift people right now to stand around idle out there and start rumors."

"Rumors about what? The robot?"

"Sure, the robot. They all hate robots. You know that, don't you? The standard complaint is that robots take jobs away from people. What they don't want to see is that robots do jobs that just can't be made safe for human workers—for instance, grinding and welding operations that can take off a finger or an ear or cause permanent eye damage."

"I gather you don't feel this particular robot could have caused Rance's death?"

"Actually I don't. But I'll tell you this much. If anybody stepped inside that robot's domain for some hare-brained reason or other, they'd end up looking exactly the way Rance does right now."

"Your safety man, Gerault, seems to have ruled out an accident pretty completely."

"Let me put you in the picture

here." Reinhard leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and assumed an intimate and confidential manner, as if he were about to tell a favorite grandchild about Cinderella.

"If this death turns out to be due to a safety violation, it could cost us hundreds of thousands in fines and penalties. The last time the company had a work-related death at this location was eleven years ago. The day after it happened, Byron Bantock, the vice president for operations, flew in from corporate headquarters in Boston and personally fired the safety director. That was Gerault's predecessor. And," he drew himself upright in his chair and glared pompously at Auburn, "Byron Bantock is in town right now."

"I guess that explains Gerault's attitude pretty well. But surely, if there were any negligence or safety violation here, it was Rance himself who was at fault?"

"Try telling that to the Feds."

"What are the possibilities that somebody engineered an accident with the robot?"

Reinhard frowned sourly, but by this time Auburn had already taken the measure of the man and saw through the play-acting. "I don't care much for your choice of terms," he rumbled. "I happen to be an engineer." He fell silent for a moment and drifted into a reverie.

"This plant was built right after the First World War," he resumed at length. "The first production line made rubber balls on little wire doohickies, to keep screen doors from slamming. You're too young

to remember those, but we were still turning them out in the fifties when I came on board. There've been a few changes since then. Now we manufacture everything from wheel and transmission bearings for golf carts to airplane seat covers. We even make synthetic crocodile skin to keep the animal rights people happy."

Auburn fidgeted in his chair. Maybe it was the espresso. "Well," he said, "if there's blood on anything out there, our death scene investigator will find it. That should clarify a few things. How long can we count on the department's being shut down?"

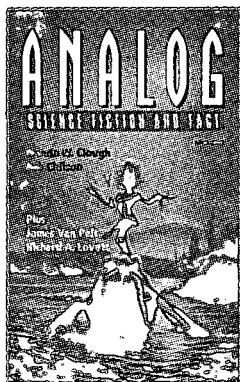
"We've already laid off the first shift for tomorrow." He looked at his watch. "Make that today. Might have had to do that anyway because they've got a press down out there. But since we've had a fatality in the department, we won't be able to start up the robot or the lines again until the safety inspectors have been here. Say twenty-four hours."

Reinhard leaned forward again. "One other thing. I don't know how familiar you are with factory people, but you're not going to get much out of them. If anybody killed Rance, they're not going to tell you. If anybody saw him killed, they're not going to tell you. There's an invisible fence between us and them, and if you haven't felt it already, you will.

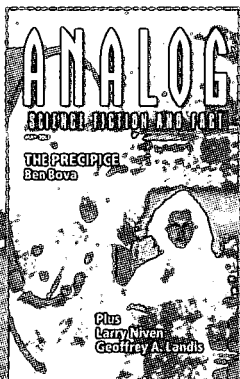
"Those guys out there are the salt of the earth, and I love every single one of them as if he were my brother. But they wouldn't waste their spit on me if I were on fire. Why?

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Because I represent capital, the establishment, officialdom—in other words, the enemy. And right now you're in the same club."

He stood up and watched the wrinkles vanish from his trouser legs. "So go out and ask your questions by all means, and good luck to you. Just so you understand you're swimming against the tide."

Reluctantly Auburn returned to the heat and noise of the factory. A few workers were still standing around talking, some in whispers and others growing boisterous, but all keeping their distance from the death scene. He found Dahlinghaus, the third-shift foreman, and asked him for a list of all the workers who had been present in the department at the time Rance had died.

Since he'd been called in early, before the second-shift people went home, Dahlinghaus was able to compile such a list from memory. Identifying information on the workers was in the computer in the office, but the computer had no printer so he'd have to write out the list by hand. He went off to do it with a remarkable show of enthusiasm.

Probably, thought Auburn, he'd been shaken by Rance's death and needed something to take his mind off it. Then again, being a third-shift foreman, he was probably a born night-owl.

Stamaty was still in the aisle writing up his report. "Lab coming?" he asked, without looking up from his clipboard.

"Supposed to be. Let me get a full I.D. from you."

Stamaty passed him Rance's wallet, from which Auburn recorded name, address, Social Security number.

"What about next of kin?"

"They say he was divorced. Got a brother on active duty in the navy. I'll take care of that."

"What time did you get here?"

"About eleven. They called you guys first, but at that point they were saying accident so your dispatcher referred it to us."

"Did you talk to any of the second-shift people who were here when it happened?"

"Sure. Just like talking to a bunch of statues. Nobody knows nothin'. Except the guy who found him, and all he knows is that it must have been that robot that did the deed."

"I couldn't get anything else out of him either. And they sent the rest of them home, so I don't know who else I'm supposed to be talking to."

"There was a guy here looking for you a couple minutes ago. Said he'd try to come back on his break."

"A worker? Or one of the brass?"

"Definitely not brass. Looked like he just crawled out of a garbage dump."

Auburn peered again at the dark window of the tool room, which would have given a clear view of Rance's death if anyone had been behind it at the time.

"What exactly is a tool room?" he asked. He tried the door and found it locked.

"Well, it's not where they keep the hammers and screwdrivers." Stamaty put away his pen. "My dad



was a toolmaker for forty-one years. He could thread a screw or cut a gear in the dark. Highly skilled work. They make the dies, molds, patterns that go in all these machines. A good toolmaker can pull down as much money as a dentist, and he doesn't have to wear gloves. Unless he feels like it."

Sergeant Kestrel, the evidence technician, escorted to the scene by Griswold, put his heavy metal field kit on the floor and unslung his camera case from his shoulder. Instead of returning Auburn's and Stamaty's greetings, he glared pointedly at the body under its blanket.

"He's exactly where he was when I got here," said Stamaty, anticipating Kestrel's routine grievance that the body had been moved before he was called to the scene.

They filled him in on the details as they knew them. The safety man, Gerault, appeared briefly up the aisle, stood still and watched Kestrel at work, nodded to no one in particular, and went away again.

Auburn wandered around the department getting the feel of the place, breathing the foul air, and hoping his hearing wasn't being permanently destroyed by the pounding of presses and the squeal of bearings. He saw workers in adjacent departments wearing ear protection and remembered to put his safety glasses back on.

Kestrel shot pictures from every imaginable angle and then went over the scene with a high intensity lamp—first the floor, then the ladder leading down into the sump, next the robot, and finally the

transmission of the defective press, which still hung from its chain like an exhibit in a museum. He swabbed likely surfaces, took samples, tested them for blood. He found some on the steps of the ladder and on the mechanism hanging from the chain, along with some broken hairs and fragments of scalp.

"It looks more like an accident than ever to me," said Auburn. "But how could that thing have hit him?"

"It couldn't," said Kestrel. "Nothing could have moved an object as heavy as that fast enough to smash his skull. Too much inertia. But he could have been thrown against it."

"Or dropped on it," suggested Stamaty through a yawn.

Kestrel looked straight up. "Dropped from where? That track? Everybody in the plant would have seen him."

"Maybe they did," said Auburn. "Nobody's admitting it, but there seems to be an epidemic of lockjaw around here."

Kestrel was preparing, with manifestations of extreme distaste, to descend into the waste sump with sampling equipment when a worker approached Auburn and asked to speak to him privately. Although not quite as grubby as Stamaty had suggested, the man probably wouldn't have been welcome, in his present state, in his own living room.

He introduced himself as Tom Varkas and showed two filthy palms as an apology for not shaking hands.

Since Dahlinghaus was now at work in the office, Auburn walked

with Varkas a little way along the aisle. Varkas stood so that he was facing away from the body. Auburn immediately sensed something different in his mood and bearing from those of the other workers, but it took him a few moments to realize that the man was in the throes of grief.

"I just wanted to say . . ." He paused and swallowed. "I just hope you'll take a good hard look at things here before you sign this out as an accident."

"Do you have any reason to think it wasn't an accident?"

Varkas thought before he answered. "Let's say grounds for suspicion. I wasn't here when it happened—I work this shift, over on the curing ovens in Department 90—but as soon as I hit the plant I heard the news, and I—got bad vibes."

"Were you and Rance pretty good friends?"

Varkas stared at his safety shoes and nodded. Auburn looked away while he wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"We used to be. Then they got to him."

"How do you mean, got to him? Who got to him?"

"He used to be a machine operator on this shift. He was always complaining about the ventilation, and the lighting, and the guards on the machines. It was as if he had a hotline to the safety inspectors—he had them in here every other week. Okay, maybe he overdid it a little."

"If you know anything about factories, you know there's a natural

antipathy between management and the federal safety people. If the corporation had fired Rance, he would have slammed them with a grievance and been reinstated with back pay inside of a week. So in order to shut him up, they took him into the fold. And because he had a streak of Napoleon in him, he let them do it."

"Took him into the fold how?"

"Why, they made him a foreman. Better pay, elevated social status, opportunity for advancement, stock options. But it also meant he had to hand in his union card. They figured that'd take his mind off complaining about safety violations." Varkas looked up and down the aisle. "But it didn't."

"And you think it's possible he was put out of the way, just because he made a nuisance of himself?"

Again Varkas looked at his shoes and nodded, more vigorously this time.

"I think it's possible. And that's all I can say. And I wouldn't even want that to get back to management."

"But you haven't seen or heard anything suspicious? Rance didn't say anything to you?"

"Rance hasn't said much to me for a couple of months. He thought I was a wimp because I'd never back him up on his complaints. Hey, I'm not a guy that looks for trouble. I've got a master's degree in modern history, but I stay here because I like working nights and I'm not ready to start climbing the academic ladder yet."

"When you've got a union card in your pocket, you've got tenure—

right now. And the fringe benefits and benefit plan beat any college I ever heard of. On the other hand, you do have to show up at work once in a while, and—I've got to get back over there."

"I'll keep what you've told me in mind. And I'll keep it to myself."

The mortuary crew were just removing Rance's remains on a stretcher. As Stamaty started off down the long aisle after them, he turned back and called to Auburn, "I'll send you some pictures."

Kestrel, stooping over a sheet of plastic on the floor near the sump, acted as if he hadn't heard. His hands and clothes were smeared with viscous slime, and amid a blob of it on the plastic sheet rested fragments of a square glass bottle.

"Now who's dropping things?" asked Auburn.

"It's not mine," snorted Kestrel irritably. He pointed to his field kit, in which a complete row of specimen bottles stood like soldiers on parade. "This one was down the hole when I got there."

Dahlinghaus brought Auburn the list of second-shift workers who had been in the plant at the time Rance died. Auburn asked him about the bottle Kestrel had just found.

"It sure doesn't belong there. But I wouldn't be surprised at anything you pulled out of there. The guys with the brooms get lazy sometimes and sweep the dirt off the floor down the sumps instead of picking it up and hauling it away. And the guys in the plant use sumps as trashcans and spittoons and I'm afraid to say what else."

When Auburn went back to get his jacket from the office, he found that someone, possibly Dahlinghaus, had been busy. Rance's personal possessions—framed training certificates and awards that had hung on the wall, a dictionary, a metal ruler, and a tin lunchbox all marked with his name in indelible marker—had been stuffed into a cardboard box on the floor. In addition, the trashcan, which had been empty a half hour earlier, was now half full of paper. Auburn glanced into the lunchbox and then stuffed as much of the paper from the trashcan into his jacket pockets as they would hold.

As he left the plant, he wondered what would happen if they decided to search him, but all they did was reclaim the safety glasses.

**D**awn was still an hour away as Auburn drove home. He showered, shaved, and tried to sleep—utterly without success, thanks in part to Stamaty's espresso but mainly because of his efforts, conscious and unconscious, to sort and assess the data in the death of Herman Rance. By the time he gave up and crawled out of bed to make breakfast, he needed more coffee.

He was thumbing idly through the morning paper when he ran across something of interest on the financial page, not his usual line of country. The presence in town of Byron Bantock, vice president for operations of Quintilian Corporation, had captured the attention of a local business analyst, who re-

ferred to Bantock as the "corporate hatchetman" and predicted a major shakeup in the organizational chart of the local division. Bantock's every move, from the time his plane had landed on Sunday night, had been dogged and reported.

It was only when Auburn got his jacket out of the closet to leave for work that he remembered the papers with which its pockets were stuffed. He pulled them out and sat back down at the breakfast table to sort them out.

Whoever had thrown the papers into the office wastebasket in Department 81 had torn every single sheet in half. This was moderately annoying, but at least no shredding or mincing had taken place. The papers fell into two groups: printed materials, mostly pamphlets and photocopies of articles from government agencies; and handwritten records of incidents or complaints—breathing trouble, rashes, injuries on the job—with names, dates, times, and locations.

When Auburn arrived at headquarters, he found that a courier had already delivered, from the coroner's office across the street in the courthouse, a sealed package of photographs taken by Stamaty at the death scene. A quick glance through them didn't suggest anything new. After arranging for Records to do background probes on everybody on Dahlinghaus's list, as well as on Rance, Gerault, Reinhard, Varkas, and Dahlinghaus himself, Auburn reported to his immediate superior, Lieutenant Savage.

"It sounds to me," said Savage after hearing his summary of the case, "like they're using us to put up a smokescreen. This death resulted from some kind of safety violation, or at least they're afraid it did, and they want to muddle up the federal investigation by setting the police off on some wild goose chase after a mythical murderer."

"I thought that too at first," said Auburn. "But apparently Rance had been making a nuisance of himself for years by uncovering safety violations and health risks at the plant. What if they just decided to snuff him? It might be the safety investigation that's the smoke-screen."

"In that case, our investigation bloody well better turn up the killer. Have you got any idea how they did it?"

"Not so far. I'd like to go back out to the plant today and maybe run into these inspectors if they're there yet."

"They'll be there all right. Just to be sure, why don't you call the regional office and see who's going, and when? And watch yourself out there. A factory can be a dangerous place."

Auburn was back at Quintilian Corporation by ten thirty A.M. The guard on the gate buzzed him in after a mere glance at his badge, mechanically doled out a pair of safety glasses, and let him find his own way to Department 81. As he passed by the suite of offices adjacent to the lobby, Auburn caught a glimpse of Gerault in earnest discussion with two or three men

around a conference table. The safety director was wearing a different suit this morning, but he still didn't have his tie on and he didn't look as if he'd slept since Auburn had seen him last.

Auburn set off on the long trek amid stifling heat, the relentless thunder and vibration of machinery, and the choking stench of chemical fumes. In Department 81 all the machines were still shut down, and even the foreman's office was dark. A crew of mechanics were sweating and swearing over the repair of the enormous contraption that apparently had somehow cracked Herman Rance's skull like an eggshell.

Just beyond them, the lighted window of Tool Room No. 5 beckoned to Auburn. Threading his way around the mechanics and the parts and equipment they had strewn over the floor, he knocked at the door of the tool room and walked in.

Entering that room from the factory was like stepping from the bustle and clamor of a city street into a library or a church. Thick walls damped much of the surrounding noise and vibration, and the ventilation system kept out most of the factory smell. The temperature was fifteen degrees cooler, and even the lighting was less harsh. The machines were small, compact, and quiet, and the men operating them, some wearing white coats, worked with deliberation and quiet competence. Auburn was reminded of Stamaty's comparison between a toolmaker and a dentist.

A tall dark man with steel-gray

hair and the mocking eyes of an inveterate jester looked up as Auburn closed the door behind him. He was wearing a long canvas apron as clean as a baker's, and his nametag read TOSCANI. He motioned for Auburn to put away his badge.

"I saw you coming a mile away," he said, "with those two-bit safety glasses you got from the guard post and your shoes that a tablespoonful of acetone would eat right off your feet."

"You don't miss much from in here, do you?"

As Auburn had surmised last night, the tool room window looked directly out on the scene of Rance's death. Whereas partitions, baffles, and ventilating ducts blocked the vision of an observer in almost any part of the aisle outside, from here one had a panoramic view of the sump, the ladder leading down into it, and the mechanism hanging from the chain.

"Sometimes it's a circus out there," agreed Toscani.

He nodded towards the mechanics who swarmed over the machine hanging from the chain hoist.

"Those clowns waited all morning to put new clutches in that stamping press, but they couldn't get near it. First, the safety inspectors were giving it the third degree, trying to figure out how it could have stood up on its hind legs and clobbered somebody. And then, when the inspectors got finished, they made the cleaners come in with their body fluids outfit and decontaminate it because there was still some blood on it. I told

these guys this morning we ought to have one of those kits in here."

"Lots of bloodshed in Tool Room 5?" asked Auburn, falling in with his jocular mood.

"Not usually—not as long as we all stay sober. But somebody must have bashed into this lathe during the night. When I came in this morning, I found dribbles of fresh blood down along here on the bed. There were a few drops there on the floor, too."

... Cut a gear in the dark ... Don't have to wear gloves, unless they want to ...

"Why would anybody have been in here during the night?" asked Auburn. "Wouldn't the door have been locked?" He knew perfectly well that it was.

"I don't know—you're the sleuth. Let's see here. It wasn't the recycling guys because the scrap bin's half full. The regular trashy trash is full, too."

Toscani had raised the hood of a metal trash receptacle to disclose an assortment of refuse stuffed down in the plastic liner.

"Isn't that some more blood?" asked Auburn.

"Those are the rags I used to clean up the lathe and the floor."

"Better not touch them. They might be evidence."

Toscani looked at him sharply. "Serious about that? Evidence of what?"

"What's that coiled up under the rags?"

"Braided polypropylene cable," announced Toscani as if he were identifying a rare wine. "Tough enough to strangle an elephant."

Too much inertia ...

"Something you use in here regularly?"

"Nope. We get very few elephants in here. They use it in the packing department."

"Can that window be opened?"

"Can be. Never is. The air conditioning in here isn't for our comfort. It's to protect the precision equipment from all the dust and humidity and fumes out in the plant."

After a brief lesson on the design and operation of a lathe, Auburn asked Toscani where he could find a pay phone.

Kestrel, the director of the forensic lab, held the same rank as Auburn as he liked to remind selected people at strategic moments. He was a genius and a virtuoso at his craft, but he was also as independent as a porcupine with rabies and just about as personable. He so resented being called back to the scene that he bluntly declined Auburn's offer of lunch at one of the fast-food spots along highway 5 across from the factory.

But before leaving the plant with a new crop of specimens, he reported his findings to Auburn, including the catalogue of articles he had dredged up out of the sump the night before: one wide-mouthed glass specimen jar broken into four pieces; a rubber stopper for same; and one scrap of thin-gauge steel, originally a ring with an external diameter of fifteen millimeters but now split and stretched out of shape.

After lunching alone, Auburn



called Lieutenant Savage from the restaurant. Savage seemed lukewarm about the case for the prosecution that Auburn had worked up and urged caution.

"That means giving them time to consult with Bantock, the honcho from Boston, who's probably in the plant right now," objected Auburn. "And he'll bring on the lawyers. Once that happens, there's a fair chance they'll weasel out of it."

"So what do you want to do?"

Auburn told him.

"Okay. It might work. But you sit tight until I send some uniformed backup. Where are you now?"

At two fifteen P.M. Auburn was back at the plant with reinforcements in the shape of Patrolmen Fritz Dollinger and Terry Krasnoy. After overcoming the expected obstacles, they found themselves with Reinhard, the works manager, in his private sanctum.

"We're about to wind up our investigation here," reported Auburn in a businesslike tone. "I think we're in a position to establish responsibility for Rance's death."

Reinhard glared impatiently from behind his mahogany desk. "The safety inspectors left a couple of hours ago," he said. "They found no safety violations and nothing to show that the plant was in any way at fault in Rance's death."

"I know what they found. I talked to them out in the parking lot this morning, by prior arrangement. I wasn't suggesting that Rance's death was due to negligence. He was murdered in cold blood."

"That's a pretty strong statement. Have you made an arrest?"

"Not yet. That's why I'm here."

Reinhard stared at the massed forces of the law with an air of injury and disdain. "Well, don't look at me. Why should I, of all people, kill Herman Rance?"

"To put an end to his complaints about safety violations."

"The factory's full of chronic complainers and cranks."

"Rance wasn't just a chronic complainer," said Auburn, "and he was certainly no crank. He knew the safety regulations, he knew when they were being violated, and he collected evidence to prove it. He cost your company thousands of dollars in penalties, and by forcing you to upgrade your lighting and ventilation. First you tried to silence him by making him part of the management."

"You mean supervision," said Reinhard, without denying the accusation. "Rance was a foreman. Management implies a higher and more comprehensive—"

"But it didn't work, did it? He went right on snooping around and calling in the safety inspectors. And then he got onto something really big. A type of germ that thrives in dirty water and rancid lubricating oil. It causes a rash if it gets on your skin and asthma if you breathe it and maybe also fibrous nodules in the lungs. Rance was gathering evidence that your plant is full of it. A cleanup could have cost the corporation millions."

Reinhard sat immobile behind the futile bastion of his mahogany desk, his sallow color and his very silence tokens of defeat.

"As you pointed out to me last

night, Mr. Reinhard, Byron Bantock is in town. This morning's paper reported on the high-level meetings you had here yesterday. I suspect one of the points Bantock made with you was that the expenses resulting from Herman Rance's private safety crusades could no longer be absorbed by Quintilian Corporation as part of the cost of doing business."

Reinhard picked up his phone, touched a key, and with his eyes fixed on the wall opposite he asked a secretary to send Gerault in.

The safety director appeared almost at once, looking harried and bewildered. The sight of Auburn and two uniformed police officers in Reinhard's office didn't exactly cheer him up.

"Hello again, Mr. Gerault," said Auburn. "I happened to see you late this morning in a meeting with the safety inspectors, and I couldn't help noticing that you've got your hand all wrapped up."

Gerault looked at the dressing and moved his bound fingers stiffly. "Cut three fingers to the bone on my car hood this morning."

Auburn nodded. "I suppose that's why you're not wearing a tie. But you didn't have a tie on last night either, did you, when you were called in to the plant after Rance's death was discovered? And you were wearing a pair of gloves then, too—maybe to cover up the bandaged fingers you cut on a lathe in Tool Room Number 5 around ten o'clock."

Gerault's mouth dropped open, and he wilted as if Auburn had punched him in the face. Reinhard

drew himself upright in his chair with much the same pomp and majesty he had displayed in the foreman's office in Department 81 last night, and fixed Gerault with a stare of cold indignation.

"He's getting ready to ditch you," Auburn warned Gerault. "Throw you to the wolves. Disclaim any knowledge or responsibility—"

Gerault turned to Reinhard with venom in his eye. "Bantock said the corporation would stand behind me if—if—"

"That's not what he said at all," Reinhard corrected him archly. "He said your job would be secure even if the inspectors ruled Rance's death was due to negligence or a safety violation."

Auburn looked at his watch. "Would you like a couple of minutes in private to get your stories straight?" he asked.

"Now, you listen to me," stormed Reinhard. "I don't know who you think you are, but you can't just walk into a world-class manufacturing concern and throw your authority around as if you were looking for some guy who held up a grocery. And you're not going to get very far trying to pit two top-level managers against each other."

"I notice you're not wasting your time denying the charge."

"What exactly is the charge?" demanded Gerault.

"First degree murder." He recited the magic words of the Miranda incantation.

Now that he knew the worst, Gerault regained some composure as years of executive training and experience reasserted themselves.

"I'd like to hear your version of this first degree murder in a little more detail," he said.

"Fair enough. You knew Rance had been taking samples of the drainage in the sump and figured he'd go back there again sometime last night. A repair crew had left a piece of machinery weighing several tons hanging from a chain next to the sump.

"I can't claim any knowledge of engineering. I enjoyed the first three days of high school physics, but then math came on the scene and the party was over. But I do remember something from the section on inertia in the textbook—two pictures of a hundred kilogram weight hanging from a rope. In one picture the weight had been drawn far off to one side by a hand pulling slowly and steadily on a piece of string. In the other, a sudden sharp tug breaks the string without budging the weight."

Gerault looked green, but Reinhard was still full of bluster. "I hope you don't expect a couple of engineers to be impressed by what you remember from high school physics," he said.

"The city prosecutor isn't an engineer, and he's the one I have to convince."

"Of what?" queried Gerault feebly.

"Of how you murdered Rance. You attached a length of plastic cable to that piece of machinery hanging in the factory, using one of the scrap rings the robot spews out all over the place. You opened the window of the tool room a crack, passed the cable inside, and, working in

the dark, wound the cable around the drum of a lathe. Then you waited for Rance to appear.

"When he climbed down into the sump with his specimen bottle, you turned on the lathe, with the drive geared as low as it would go. As the motor reeled in the cable, the piece of machinery was gradually pulled sideways until the chain was probably twenty or thirty degrees from the vertical. The factory noise masked the sound of the lathe, and if anybody happened to go along the aisle, they probably didn't even notice the machine hanging crooked in the shadows.

"As soon as Rance started up out of the sump, you shifted into high gear. The sudden jerk on the cable snapped the ring and let the machine swing back by its own weight. It hit Rance with the force of a derailed express train. A perfect piece of engineering."

"We haven't admitted anything," said Gerault. "And if we had, we'd both deny it later. Your entire case is built up of suppositions."

"I've got a lot more than suppositions, Mr. Gerault. I've got the cable, I've got the steel ring that gave way when you geared up the lathe motor, and I've got the unimpeachable witness of your own blood on both the lathe and the cable. Can you prove where you were at ten o'clock last night?"

Gerault pointed at Reinhard with his bandaged fingers.

"How do you know it isn't his blood?"

"I don't know yet. That's why I brought arrest warrants for both of you." Auburn showed them the

tops of two folded documents in his inside pocket. "Which one of you is actually charged will depend on which one's blood matches the specimens from the tool room. I assume that at least one of you is anxious to get downtown and have a blood sample taken for comparison."

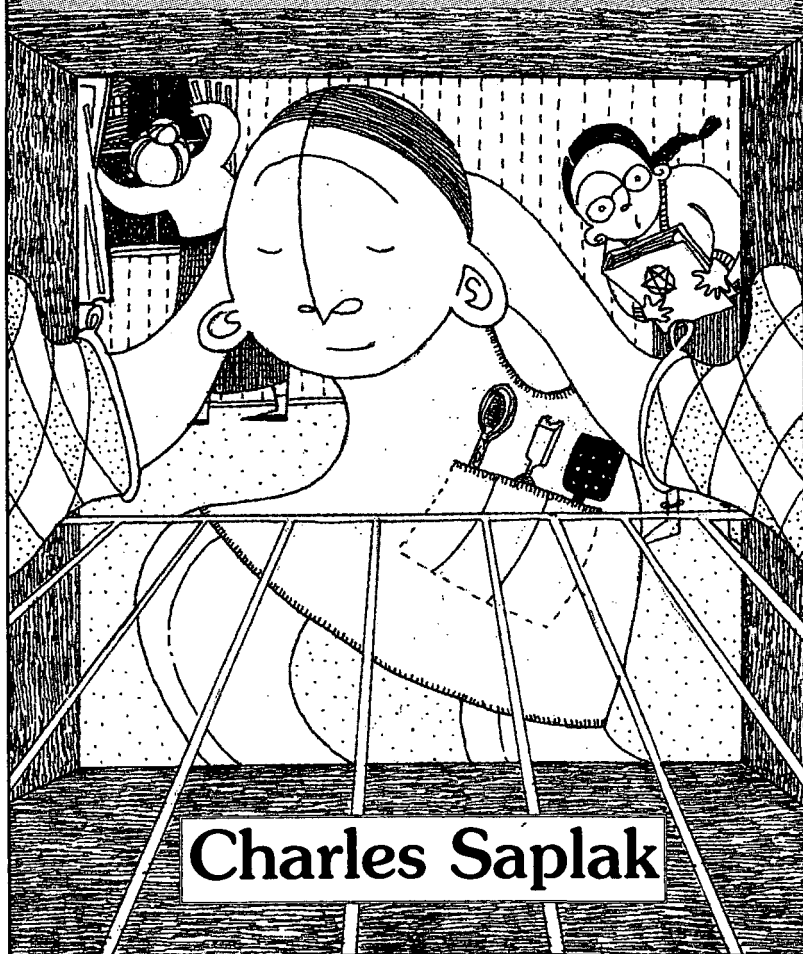
Time and time again Auburn had vowed to suppress the sarcastic jibes that rose to his lips in moments of triumph. But the recollection of Rance's battered brains and Varkas' mute grief were fresh and strong.

"I have some advice for whichever one of you flunks the blood test," he said, "advice that I guarantee is

sounder than the garbage you fed me last night, Mr. Reinhard, when you were telling me how much you love all the folks out there in the factory. It's this: don't call the company's lawyers."

Reinhard and Gerault, exchanging malignant glances, allowed themselves to be shepherded to the patrol car by the uniformed officers. After getting into his own car to follow them to headquarters, Auburn slipped the two documents out of his inside pocket and examined them briefly. One was entitled "Babylon the Great Has Fallen"; the other, "Washed in the Blood of the Lamb."

# Meatloaf Is Monday



Charles Saplak

**T**here are numerous lessons to be learned from the strange convergence of events of that Monday night in the suburbs. Control what your children read. Concentrate on the task at hand. Never bear a grudge. If you plan a project, conduct an inventory of all required materials before starting. Love thy neighbor. Had any one of these dicta been adhered to, Tragedy could have been averted. . . .

All of Charly Samuel's natural tendencies and talents dictated that he be a sculptor, so he was a clerk with the local phone company. But he did clay, porcelain, and wood sculptures in his free time. He had a little workshop-studio set up on one side of his two-car garage.

And this was a small complication. The garage was on the side of the house adjacent to the Thompsons, Earl and Judy.

Many times, because of the sawdust, or the varnishes, which required ventilation, or the heat from the kiln, Charly wanted to work with his garage door open. Earl Thompson usually took that open garage door as an invitation to come in, beer in hand, to watch Charly work.

That wouldn't be so bad, to have someone admire his throwing of clay on the potter's wheel, or his turning of a cocobolo goblet or a walnut bowl on his lathe, or his chiseling of a burl into an abstraction of a trout or a hawk. Or just to listen to Charly talk about his tools. Theoretically, it could be pleasant, it could be stimulating, to have someone ask intelligent questions

about a skorp or a rasp or a spoke-shave.

But Earl Thompson would never be that someone. Intelligent comments? Earl's "funny" comments were like breaking glass, like fingernails on slate.

"Damn, Charly, that thing is crooked! . . . Now that one there, is that a fish or a bird? Or do you know?"

And when Charly was able to tune out all the "humor," just as he could tune out the whine of a machine or the smell of a solvent, every once in a while Earl would turn serious and make the announcement that ratcheted Charly's jaw muscles:

"I think I'll make me some statues sometime. Don't look hard."

That Monday night, after a particularly dreary workday, Charly had a chance to do some rough turning on an expensive piece of spalted maple. He could do that with the garage doors shut. There was a goblet hiding inside that wood. A beautiful piece if he could but let it out . . .

He had the lathe on and had it up to speed, had just touched his gouge to the wood, when he heard Laura calling from upstairs. Heaving a sigh, he put down the gouge, turned off the lathe, and went inside to yell up to the kitchen, "What do you want, Laura?"

When she didn't answer, he sighed again and tromped upstairs.

Tabitha, their twelve-year-old daughter, lay on the living room floor mumbling, her reading glasses on, books and papers spread around her.



Laura was in the kitchen, bent over a mixing bowl on the counter.

"Laura, what do you want? Were you yelling for me?"

Laura straightened up, tried to blow a lock of hair off her forehead. "We don't have any eggs. Could you go get two eggs from the Thompsons?"

Charly sighed. "I was turning that maple. You know, the spalted maple I was telling you about?"

Laura held up her hands. "Well, I'm covered with ground pork and ground beef and spice. I don't want to walk around like this, I'll make a mess."

"What about Tab?"

"Tab's doing her homework. It's not fair to tell her no TV and no phone calls during homework, then interrupt her to do us some favor."

Charly slumped. "Do the Hollandsworths have any eggs?"

"They might, but they're not home. You going to break into their house?"

Charly grimaced. "But he's over there." She knew who he was talking about.

"Charly—just—go—get—the—eggs!" Laura said, gritting her teeth. Without stopping to wash her hands, she pushed past him, going back to their bedroom. "You think we're going to eat your spotty maple for dinner tonight?" she said, angry but also almost crying.

Looking after her, watching the door close, his heart sank. He hadn't been thinking. She'd probably had as bad a day as he.

"I'll be back in a minute, Tab," he called to his daughter.

She didn't look up but kept her

face pressed to the old oversized library book open before her, moving her lips as she read.

"Tabitha?" Charly said. "Earth to Tabitha? I'm going to the Thompsons'. When Mom comes out, tell her I'm going to take care of supper."

"Yeah, Dad. Whatever."

At the Thompsons' Charly thought he was off the hook when Judy answered the door. Frail and freckled, with red-rimmed eyes, Judy always seemed jumpy.

"Hi, Judy. Could we get two eggs from you? We need them for supper, and we're out."

Before she could even answer, Earl popped off the couch. "Hey, buddy. I'll get 'em. Come on in and have a beer."

"Aw, thanks, Earl, but I just can't. I'm . . . I'm . . . I'm kinda helping with dinner."

"Dang, buddy, you ain't supposed to do supper. You got two girls over there. Just put the girls to work."

"Yeah, ha, yeah, Earl, I'll have to do that."

Earl came out of the kitchen with two eggs in one hand, two cans of beer in the other. "Sure you don't wanna down one?"

"Not right now, Earl. Just . . . right in the middle of fixing supper."

"Well, more for me. Now remember, these eggs are mine. They belong to me. You're just borrowing them. They're mine."

"Okay, Earl," Charly said, sighing. What a lame joke, Charly thought. I would have been better off walking to the grocery store. On my knees. Bare knees. Over glass.

"Oh yeah. Speaking of borrow-

ing—" Earl said, handing Charly the eggs and putting down the beers. He disappeared through the kitchen, and Charly heard their basement door open and close.

Charly stood there, eggs in hand, awkward and uncomfortable. He glanced at Judy. She could barely raise her eyes to meet his.

"He likes you," Judy whispered.

"I'm sorry?"

"He likes you," she said, no more loudly than before.

Briefly, Charly felt a throb of shame at disliking Earl so much, but then the basement door opened and Earl returned. He had something in his hand, and he extended that hand toward Charly.

"I finally found me some used bricks to extend out my patio, but they had old mortar stuck to 'em," Earl said. "Your garage door was open, so I borrowed this. Worked pretty good. Got all the mortar off."

Stunned, Charly took the thing Earl was offering and turned to go without saying a word. As he walked home, he shook his head and muttered to himself while looking at the thing, the chisel, Earl had returned to him.

The bevel was completely gone; the handle was split where Earl had no doubt struck it with a claw hammer; the cutting edge looked as ragged as a row of saw teeth. High-speed, high-carbon, laminated steel from Sheffield, England, in a hand-turned rosewood handle.

A seventy dollar cabinetmaker's chisel.

And that ape had pounded bricks with it.

Back home, Laura was still pout-

ing somewhere while Tabitha mumbled over her book, oblivious to everything and everyone around her.

Charly looked into the metal mixing bowl. Everything seemed to be there. Ground beef, ground pork, the spices out of the pre-mixed packet Laura had cut open and left on the counter, and the shredded bread.

He broke in the eggs. A sliver from one shell fell into the bowl, but Charly carefully fished it out. Nothing in the world worse than biting into eggshell.

He kneaded the mixture around in the bowl for about a minute and a half.

Damn him. Damn him. Earl Thompson made everything all wrong. It would be so good around here if he were gone. So good for everyone.

"Dad, what are these words?" Tabitha asked. She held the big dusty book up to Charly's face.

He looked over his shoulder. The book was falling apart and smelled awful. "Tab, I don't know. They look foreign."

"But, Dad, how would you pronounce this?"

He sighed. "Okay, I guess . . . *representazio, possessio, oratorio, intentio, sacrificio* . . . aw, Tab, can't I help you later? I'm up to my elbows—"

"Oh—kay!" she hissed, taking the dusty book back to the living room.

Scowling, Charly turned back to the mix, slapping it down into the stoneware baking dish. Why did things go so wrong? This could have been a very relaxing evening. He

could be looking at the rough form of a beautiful maple goblet right now. His wife and daughter could be sitting in the living room, content and smiling. How did things go so wrong?

Squeezing and kneading and shaping, Charly knew exactly why things had gone so wrong. It had all boiled down to one person. Those vacuous eyes, that silly mouth, the beetling brow, the nose meant for poking into others' business . . . How much better off the world would be . . .

And then he looked down at what he was making. Oh boy. He had really let that oaf get under his skin. He wasn't even thinking.

And then he laughed.

Weird—but he'd leave it like that. It would be a good laugh. It would be a chance for everybody to break the tension.

He put it in to cook, set the temperature and the timer.

After he washed up, he poured himself a little red wine and went to sit behind Tab, leaving Laura to come out whenever she felt like it.

It was time to regroup. Get some quiet time and put things in perspective. His life was better, easier, than that of millions of people. There was typically a lot of bickering with Laura and Tabitha, but there were certainly good times, too. So his neighbor was annoying—at least they weren't trying to kill each other.

Think how Judy had to feel about Earl. Right now, if he concentrated real hard, he thought he heard screaming behind the closed windows of their air-conditioned house.

Yeah, things could be a lot worse. Charly let the wine uncoil some strings wound too tight deep inside . . .

"Whatcha reading, Tab? Practicing for a play?"

She looked back at him over the rims of her glasses.

"I found this cool book at the library, Dad. I'm doing a project on the Salem witch trials for history, and this was in the section way back in the back. They didn't even know they had it in the library, but they let me check it out just the same."

Charly leaned forward to examine the dusty, cracked leather binding. In faded letters he read, "Grimoire of Montague Wormuskin, Croatan, Augusta, 1713".

"So what's it about?"

"Everything is in here, Dad. Everything! It's just that a lot of it isn't in English."

She picked the leaves up to show him an illustration. Charly wrinkled his brow and scowled at the old woodcut of a human figure overlaid by a five-pointed star.

Well, at least she was reading.

Charly leaned back and sipped the wine again. He hoped her grades would come up this semester, more in line with her potential. Of course, he hoped she wasn't going to start wearing solid black and writing poetry. A light touch was required. He couldn't forbid the book. That would be an irresistible challenge to a twelve-year-old.

"Do me one favor, Tab?"

"Yeah?"

"Just remember, it's just an old book."

"All right, Dad."

Another glass of wine, and before long Laura came back out of the bedroom. "Something smells good," she said.

"You should know," Charly said. "You made it."

"Sorry I got mad, Charly. Rough day."

"Well, forget it. I was silly."

Laura sat down by Charly on the couch, close enough so that their hips touched. One way to salvage even the worst Monday, Charly thought. In the distance a siren was wailing, but that was outside. All troubles were outside.

"I thought you might be taking a nap," Charly whispered to her.

"I would've. I heard yelling over at the Thompsons'. After a while I didn't hear it any more. I got worried. You know, I don't think Earl's very good to Judy."

Charly shrugged and shook his head. And then the kitchen timer started beeping.

"Oh, hey," Charly said, brightening. "You guys have got to see this."

Tabitha put down her book and followed Charly into the kitchen. He turned off the stove, and pulled

on the oversized oven mitts, which came halfway up his forearms.

Laura didn't follow them into the kitchen but went to the living room window. The siren grew louder.

"I wasn't even thinking, well, not consciously, but in my mind I saw a certain face while I was making supper . . ."

"Is this a pizza, Dad?"

"That siren's coming close," Laura said.

"Pizza is Saturday, Tab. Meatloaf is Monday."

Charly took the stoneware dome off the circular baking dish.

"Here, Tab, look at this," Charly said, balancing the stoneware dome and revealing the bubbling, hissing meatloaf.

"Eeyeeewww," Tabitha said, curling up her lip. "That's it. I'm turning vegetarian."

"Charly? An ambulance just pulled up at the Thompsons'," Laura said, looking out the window.

Charly Samuel stared at the face in the pan. "Three hundred and fifty degrees for one hour and fifteen minutes," he whispered.

"Why does it look like it's screaming?" Tabitha asked.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# Pond the Pantaloons

G. K. Chesterton



*Illustration by Patrick Timmes*

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“No, no, no,” said Mr. Pond, with a gentle shrillness which he occasionally showed when any doubt was thrown on the prosaic precision of his statements or arguments. “I did not say it was a red pencil and that was why it made such black marks. I said it was relatively a red pencil, or resembled a red pencil, as compared with Wotton’s view in regarding it as a blue pencil, and that was why it made such black marks. The distinction may seem a small one, but I assure you the most enormous errors arise out of this habit of taking a remark out of its context and then stating it not quite correctly. The most ordinary and obvious truths, when reported in that way, may be made to sound almost absurd.”

“Almost,” said Captain Gahagan, nodding gravely and gazing at the little man opposite him rather as if he were a mysterious monster in a tank.

Mr. Pond was in his private tank, or private office, in a hive of government offices, sitting at a desk and busy at the work of blue-penciling the proofs of some official report; whence had arisen the talk about the color of the pencil. Pond, in short, was doing his morning’s work as usual; Peter Gahagan was doing nothing, also as usual; his large figure lounged in a chair that looked too small for him; he was attached to Mr. Pond and even more attached to watching other people work.

“I may resemble Polonius,” said Pond modestly, and indeed his old fashioned beard, owlsh expression, and official courtliness made the comparison almost apt. “I may be like Polonius, but I am not Polonius—which is just the point I wish to illustrate. Hamlet told Polonius that a cloud in the sky was like a camel. The effect would have been somewhat different if Hamlet had stated, seriously and scientifically, that he had seen a camel in the sky. In that case Polonius might have been pardoned in regarding the prince’s madness as finally proved. Touchy officials have been known to express the view that you, my dear Gahagan, come into this office like a buffalo, and there ‘lie wallowing through the long summer day’ as an outmoded poet puts it. But if the authorities of the zoo sent for you on the ground that you actually were a buffalo, the department would hardly move in the matter without further inquiries.”

“No doubt you have my dossier,” said Gahagan, “with official calculations and statistics about the number of my legs, not to mention my horns, all annotated with blue and red pencil—and most certainly with some very black marks against my name. But that brings me back to the original subject of my simple wonder. You hardly seem to have noticed what was really peculiar in your own remark. In any case I do not quite understand what you mean by a pencil being relatively red . . .”

“Even that phrase might be defended,” observed Mr. Pond, with a



faint smile. "You would say, for instance, that my notes on this proof are in blue pencil, and yet—" He held out a pencil with its red chalk point towards the other. It looked like a mild conjuring trick until he twiddled it so as to show it was one of those pencils sold by most stationers, with red at one end and blue at the other. "Now, suppose I wear down the blue point till it has nearly gone (and really the misprints they can put into a simple report on Baluchistan bimetallism are incredible); then you would say the pencil was relatively red though still perhaps rather blue. If the red end were worn away, you would say it was mostly blue though a little red."

"I should say nothing of the sort," exclaimed Gahagan with abrupt impatience. "I should say what I said before, that the queer thing about you is that you are quite blind to what was really mad in your statement. You can't see the paradox in your own remark. You can't see the point of your own remark."

"The point of my remark," said Mr. Pond with dignity, "which I thought I had made sufficiently clear, was that people are very inexact in reporting statements, as in cases like a camel and 'something like a camel.'"

Peter Gahagan continued to stare with round eyes at his friend, like a buffalo in a very ruminant phase, and eventually heaved himself up, collecting his grey top hat and walking stick with a sort of clatter.

"No," he said, "I will not point out the point. It would be breaking a crystal or shattering a perfectly rounded soap bubble. To pierce the pure and spherical perfection of your maniacal calm would be like invading the innocence of a child. If you really and truly do not know when you are talking nonsense, if you do not even notice what part of it is nonsense, I feel I must leave your nonsensical intellect intact. I will go and talk it over with Wotton. As he has often breezily observed, there is no nonsense about *him*."

And he sauntered out of the room, swinging his stick, in the direction of the very important department presided over by Sir Hubert Wotton that he might enjoy the inspiriting spectacle of another friend doing his day's work and being interrupted by an idle man.

Sir Hubert Wotton, however, was of a type somewhat different from Mr. Pond in that, even if he was busy, he was never fussy. Mr. Pond was bent over the poised point of his blue pencil; Sir Hubert was first visible behind the red end of a cigar, which he was puffing with a frown of reflection as he turned over the papers on his desk. He recognized the entry of the beaming captain with a grim but not ungracious smile and waved him to a seat.

Gahagan sat down with his hands crossed on his stick and thumped it on the floor. "Wotton," he said, "I've solved the problem of the Paradoxes of Pond. He doesn't know when he's said these crazy things.

There's a blind spot on his excellent brain, or a cloud comes over his mind for a moment, and he forgets that he's even said anything peculiar. He goes on arguing about the reasonable part of his speech; he never stops to explain the only thing that was really unreasonable. He talked to me quite sensibly about a pencil that was bright red, or something like it, and therefore marked very black on the paper. I tried to nail him to that piece of inconsequence, and he completely eluded me. He went on talking about when a blue pencil was not a blue pencil, but he somehow forgot all about the black marks."

"Black marks!" said Wotton, and sat up so abruptly that he spilt the ash of his cigar over his usually immaculate waistcoat. He dusted off the defilement with a frown and then, after a pause, spoke in the staccato fashion that occasionally revealed that he was much less conventional than he looked.

"Most fellows who talk paradoxes are only trying to show off. It's not like that with Pond; he does it because he's trying not to show off. You see—he looks a very sedentary, scientific little cuss as if he'd never been unhooked from a desk or a typewriter, but he's really had some very extraordinary experiences. He doesn't talk about them, he doesn't want to talk about them, but he does want to talk about reason and philosophy and theoretical things in books; you know he loves reading all the rational eighteenth century literature. But when, in the course of talking in the abstract, he comes on some concrete thing that he has actually done—well, I can only say he crumples it up. He tries to crush it into a small space, and it simply sounds contradictory. Almost every one of those crazy sentences simply stands for one of the adventures in what would be called by most people a very unadventurous life."

"I think I see what you mean," said Gahagan, after a pause of radiant reflection. "Yes, you're right. You can't expect me to be taken in, mind you, by most of your swagger of stoicism in the English public school man. Half the time they are simply showing off by not showing off. But in Pond it's genuine. He really does hate the limelight; in that way you may say he was made for the Secret Service. And you mean that he only becomes mysterious, in this particular manner, when he really does want to keep the secret of his services. In other words, you mean there is a story behind every paradox of Pond. Certainly that is true—of all those cases when I have been told the story."

"I know all about this story," said Wotton, "and it was one of the most remarkable things that Pond ever did. It was a matter of immense importance—the sort of public affair that has to be kept a very private affair. Pond gave two pieces of advice which some thought very odd and which turned out exactly right, and he ended by making a rather extraordinary discovery. I don't know how he came to mention it just now, but I'm pretty sure it was by accident. When it turned up, he tried to

tuck it away again in a hurry and change the subject. But he certainly saved England; also he nearly got killed."

"What!" exclaimed Gahagan with some astonishment.

"The fellow must have fired five times at him," said Wotton reminiscently, "before he turned the sixth shot on himself."

"Well, I'm blowed," said the captain elegantly. "I always thought Pond the most charming of tea table comedies; I never knew he figured in a melodrama. I should as soon have thought of his figuring in a fairy pantomime.

"But he seems somehow associated with theatrical things at the moment. He asked me himself if he was like Polonius, and I suppose some malicious people would say he was more like Pantaloon. I like the notion of you and him magically transplanted to a Christmas pantomime: 'Harlequin Hubert and the Fairies' Pond,' all ending with a real Harlequinade, with red fire and the Pantaloon falling over the Policeman. Pardon my talking nonsense—you know my unfortunate mind only becomes fertile about impossible things."

"It's curious you should call it impossible," said Sir Hubert Wotton, knitting his brows, "because that's almost exactly what really happened to us."

Sir Hubert Wotton showed a certain reticence and deliberate vagueness about the official details of the story, even in telling it after so many years to an intimate friend. In England especially there are enormous events which never get into the newspapers and are apparently intended never to get into the history books. It may be enough to say here that there was at one time under the surface, but very near to the surface, a conspiracy aiming at a coup d'état, which was backed by a continental power of similar leanings. Gunrunning, secret drilling, and plans for stealing State documents were involved, and it was feared that a certain number of minor officials had been corrupted or converted by the conspirators. Hence, when it was a question of sending certain very private official documents (about the nature of which Wotton remained somewhat hazy to the end) from one of the great northern ports to a particular government department in London, the first council was a very small and select one, presided over by Sir Hubert and held in the smaller office of Mr. Pond. Indeed, Mr. Pond was the official in charge of the job. The only other person permanently present was one of the first officials from Scotland Yard; Wotton had brought his clerk with him to arrange and explain certain matters but had later made an excuse for sending the man out on an errand. Dyer, the detective from the Yard, a heavy-shouldered, hardheaded person with a toothbrush mustache, explained methodically, if a little mechanically, the precautions and arrangements he would consider necessary for protecting the transport of the papers to their destination. He wanted

an armored car with a machine gun, a certain number of men carrying concealed arms, a police search of everybody involved in first dispatching and in finally receiving the box or parcel—and several other conditions of the kind.

"Pond will think all this terribly expensive," said Wotton, with a sad smile. "Pond is quite the Old Liberal in the matter of economy and retrenchment. But he will agree that we are all bound to show particular care in this case."

"N-no," said Mr. Pond, pursing his lips dubiously. "I don't think I should show any particular care in this case."

"Not show any particular care!" repeated the astonished Wotton.

"I certainly shouldn't show it," said Mr. Pond. "In such cases nobody of sense would take such particular precautions, any more than anybody would send an important letter by registered post."

"Well, you must pardon my dullness," said Sir Hubert, "but as a matter of fact, I *have* heard of people sending an important letter by registered post."

"It is done, I believe," said Mr. Pond with distant disparagement. "But that is when you are trying to prevent a letter being lost. Just now you are trying to prevent a letter being found."

"That sounds rather interesting," said Dyer with some restrained amusement.

"Don't you see? It's quite simple," answered Pond. "If you want to prevent a document from being dropped down a drain, or thrown into a dustbin, or used to light the fire or to make a bird's nest, or any other accident of neglect, then it is a good thing to draw attention to it by stamping or sealing or safeguarding it in some particular way. But if you want to prevent it from being tracked and spotted and snatched out of your hands by violence or stratagem, then it's the worst thing in the world to mark it in a particular way. Registration, for instance, doesn't mean that your messenger can't be knocked on the head or have his pocket picked. It only means that your messenger or his department can be held responsible; may have to apologize or compensate. But you don't want apologies or compensations; you want the letter. I should say it would be far safer from a watchful enemy if it were unmarked and sent along with a thousand others looking exactly the same."

It is a tribute to the essential shrewdness, underlying the apparent woodenness of Wotton and Dyer; that the paradox of Pond prevailed. The documents, however, were too bulky to be treated as ordinary letters, and after some discussion they were placed in one of a large number of white wooden boxes, light and not very large, which were in general use for sending chocolate and other provisions to the army or navy or some branches of the public service. The only part of his original pro-

gram on which the hardheaded Dyer continued to insist was that of putting guards and searchers at essential points of the route of travel.

"I suppose there'll be some damned fuss about it afterwards," he said, "and people will pester us about interfering with the liberty of the subject. We're handicapped in this confounded constitutional country. Now if we were in—"

He shut his mouth rather sharply as a discreet knock sounded on the door and Sir Hubert's clerk glided in to say he had discharged his commission. Sir Hubert did not see him at first, his frowning gaze being fixed on the railway map of the route to be pursued, and Dyer happened at the moment to be examining very closely the white deal box which had already been selected and sent in as a sample. But Mr. Pond noticed the clerk and could not help thinking that he was rather worth noticing. He was a young man named Franks with fair hair correctly flattened and neat enough in figure and costume, but his wide face had that indescribable look which is sometimes seen, of which we can only say that it suggests the large head on the little figure of a dwarf, or perhaps that sunken between the shoulders of a hunchback; the face is not normal, even upon a normal figure. But the other causes which arrested Mr. Pond's eye for a moment were, first, the fact that the clerk was noticeably ill at ease when he silently handed papers to his superior, and, last but not least, that he had started visibly when he saw the detective from Scotland Yard.

The second council, if it may be called so, was held in what all agreed was the strategical center of the whole maneuver: a certain railway junction in the Midlands. It so happened that the consignment of boxes, along with mailbags and similar things, had to be shifted here from one train to another, which came up afterwards to the same platform. It was at this point that there was most possibility of any interference from outside, and it is to be feared that Dyer stretched several points in his reluctant compromise with the British Constitution, in the matter of police orders which stopped, detained, or examined persons attempting to enter or leave the station.

"I have told our people they mustn't even let us out of the station," he said, "without close examination, for fear somebody should have a fancy for dressing up as Mr. Pond."

"It has quite a festive sound, so near Christmas," said Mr. Pond dolefully. "So I take it that for the present we must stay on the station, and one can hardly say it looks particularly festive."

Nothing indeed can well look more desolate than one of the numerous side platforms of an empty railway station on a dreary winter day unless it is the empty third class waiting room which is provided to be a human refuge from the winter blast. Somehow the waiting room looks even less human than the platform from which it is a refuge;

hung with a few printed notices that nobody could possibly read, tables of trains or dusty plans of railways, equipped in one corner with broken pens with which nobody could write, and dried inkstands containing no ink to write with; with one dab of dull colors, the faded advertisement of an insurance company. It certainly seemed to the casual mind a god-forsaken place to be spending any part of Christmas, but Mr. Pond had a stoical cheerfulness under such circumstances which rather surprised those who only knew his catlike love of comfortable domestic routine.

He entered this empty and unsightly apartment with a brisk step, stopping for a moment to stare reflectively at the dried ink and broken pens on the corner table. "Well," he said, turning away, "they couldn't do very much with those anyhow, but of course they might have pencils or fountain pens. I'm rather glad I did it, on the whole."

"Pond," said Wotton gravely, "this is in your department anyhow, and I'm sure that Dyer will agree that we've done well to follow your advice so far. But I hope you don't mind my having a mild curiosity about what it is that you've done."

"Not at all," replied Pond. "Perhaps I ought to have told you about it before. Very likely I ought to have done it before. But just after you'd been good enough to let me have my own way about sending it along with all the other stuff in plain identical boxes, I sat down and had a hard think about what would be the next best precaution following on that. I'm pretty certain that if it had been taken in a special car by armed men that car would have been wrecked and those armed men perhaps robbed by force of arms; anyhow, there was too much of a risk of it. There's a much more elaborate gangster organization working against us already than most people have any notion of, and to multiply purchases and preparations is to multiply clues and transactions for their spies to trail. But I don't think the gangs could possibly get in here, especially now that the police are holding the gates of all these stations like fortresses. An isolated man or so could do very little against them. But what *could* an isolated man do?"

"Well," said Wotton rather impatiently, "what could he do?"

"As I say," continued Mr. Pond calmly, "I sat down and had a good think about what a spy or stray intruder might do, in a quiet way without any noise of battle, murder, or sudden death, if he did manage somehow to spot the right box. So I got on to the private telephone to headquarters and told them to see that the postal and transport authorities held up every one of the boxes or packages on which the address seemed to have been altered; anything crossed out or anything substituted. A man might conceivably snatch a moment to redirect a box to some of his friends in London though he could never take the box out of the station without being searched. That's what I did, and it



was these broken-down penholders that reminded me of it. It's a pretty broken-down place to spend Christmas in as you say; they have given us a sort of a fire, which is more than some waiting rooms do, but it looks as if it were dying of depression, and I don't wonder."

He stirred up the neglected fire, making quite a creditable blaze, with his usual instinct for the comforts of life; then he added, "I hope you don't disagree with that second precaution of mine."

"No, I think that also is a very sensible precaution though I hope there is no chance of anybody hitting on the right box even by accident." Hubert Wotton frowned a moment at the renewed flame and the dancing sparks and then said gloomily, "This is about the time when people at Christmas are going to the pantomime. Or at any rate to the pictures."

Mr. Pond nodded; he seemed to be suddenly smitten with a fit of abstraction. At last he said, "I sometimes wonder whether things weren't better when pictures meant the pictures in the fire instead of the pictures on the film."

Sir Hubert Wotton gruffly suggested, in a general way, that the dingy fire in a third class waiting room was not one in which he would prefer to look for pictures.

"The fire pictures, like the cloud pictures," went on Mr. Pond, "are just incomplete enough to call out the imagination to complete them. Besides," he added, cheerfully poking the fire, "you can stick a poker into the coals and break them up into a different picture, whereas if you push a great pole through the screen because you don't like the face of a film star, there is all sorts of trouble."

Dyer, who had stamped out on to the platform during this imaginative interlude, returned at this moment with highly practical news. By exploring many tunnels and scouring many platforms on that labyrinthine junction, he had found that there really was a remote refreshment room in which it was possible to have some sort of lunch, which had been a silent problem for all three of the officials involved.

"I'll stay on this platform," he said; "in fact I shall stay on this platform all night if necessary. This is my particular job. But you go and get your lunch first and come back, and I'll see if I can get some afterwards. Never mind about the trains; I've arranged for all that, and, anyhow, I shall be there when the only possible moment of danger comes."

In fact his last words were almost drowned in the throb and racket of the approach of the first train. They all saw the mailbags and boxes and packages duly put out on the platform, and then Wotton, a man of regular habits who was beginning to feel rather peckish, was easily persuaded by Dyer to accept his arrangement and go in search of a bite of food. Wotton and Pond dispatched their rather meager lunch with reasonable rapidity but, even so, had occasion to quicken their foot-

steps as they came within sight of their own original platform, since a train, which was apparently the second train, was beginning to shift and puff out of the station and when they rejoined their companion, the platform was already bare.

"All safe," said Dyer with satisfaction. "I saw all the boxes and things into the van myself, and nobody's been here to interfere with them. Our main trouble is really over, and I shouldn't mind having a little lunch myself." He grinned at them, rubbing his hands in a congratulatory manner, and as he turned towards the subterranean passages, they turned once more with the intention of returning to the hollow and smoky cell of the waiting room.

"It does seem as if there were nothing more for us to do here," said Wotton. "It rather increases the freezing futility of this shack."

"I consider it quite a Christmas triumph," said Mr. Pond with undiminished cheerfulness, "that we have managed to keep the fire in, anyhow . . . why, I believe it's begun to snow."

For some time they had noted that the afternoon, already darkening towards the early winter evening, had something of that lurid greenish light which often glows under the load of snowclouds; a sprinkling began to fall as they went along the apparently interminable platform, and by the time they reached the austere waiting room, its roof and doorway were powdered with silver. The fire was burning briskly inside; Dyer had evidently been keeping himself warm.

"It's devilish queer," said Wotton, "but the whole thing is really beginning to look like a Christmas card. Our dismal *salle d'attente* will soon be a parody of Father Christmas's cottage in a pantomime."

"The whole thing is like the parody of a pantomime," said Pond in a lower and more disquieted tone, "and as you say, it is very queer."

After a pause Wotton added abruptly, "What is worrying you, Pond?"

"I'm wondering, if not worrying," answered Pond, "about exactly what a man would do to intercept or misdirect that box, in a place like this, with no pens or anything. . . . Of course, there's not much in that; he might have a fountain pen or a pencil."

"Oh, you've settled all that; you seem to be mad on pencils," said Wotton impatiently. "It comes of always blue-penciling those everlasting proofs of yours."

"It wouldn't be a blue pencil," said Pond, shaking his head. "I was thinking of something more like a red pencil, which would mark very black indeed. But what bothers me is that there are always more ways of doing anything than you'd fancy, even in a place like this."

"But you've blocked all that already," insisted the other, "by telephoning as you did."

"Well," said Pond obstinately, "and what would they do then; if they knew I'd telephoned?"

Wotton looked puzzled, and Pond sat down in silence, stirring the fire and staring at it.

After a silence he said abruptly, "I wish Dyer were back."

"What do you want him now for?" asked his friend. "I should say he'd earned a little late lunch. As far as I can see, he's finished the business, and it's all over here."

"I fear," said Pond, without taking his head out of the fireplace, "that it's only just going to begin."

There was another silence of growing mystification, like the gathering darkness outside. And then Pond observed suddenly, "I suppose we've come back to the right platform."

Wotton's face only expressed the stolid stupefaction natural under the circumstances, but in his depths, which were deeper than some supposed, an unearthly chill touched him for the first time. Nightmare stirred in its sleep; not the mere practical perplexity of a problem, but all those doubts beyond reason which revolve round place and time. Before he could speak, Pond added, "This is a different shaped poker."

"What the devil do you mean?" exploded Wotton at last. "They have locked up the station, and there is nobody on it but ourselves, except that girl in the bar. You don't imagine she has put a new set of furniture and fire-irons in all the waiting rooms?"

"No," said Mr. Pond. "I didn't say a new poker. I said a new shape of poker."

Almost as he spoke, he leapt away from the fireplace, leaving the poker in the fire, and ran to the doorway, craning out his head and listening. His companion listened also, and recognized as an objective reality, which was no nightmare, a noise of scrambling footsteps somewhere on the platform. But when they ran out, the platform appeared to be perfectly empty, now a blank and solid table of snow, and they began to realize that the noise came from underneath their feet. Looking over the railing, they saw that the whole raised woodwork of the station was intercepted at one point by a belt of grassy embankment, very grey and discolored with the smoke; they were just in time to see a dark, lean figure scramble up this bank and dive under the platform in such a manner that he was able the next moment to crawl out on the line. Then he calmly mounted the platform and stood there like a passenger waiting for a train.

Apart from the fact that the stranger had practically burgled the station, against such very special difficulties, Wotton's mind, already full of suspicions, decided at a glance that he was very much of a dark horse. Curiously enough, he looked a little like a horse, having a long, equine visage and a strange sort of stoop; he was swarthy and haggard, and his hollow eyes were such dense patches of shadow that it was a sort of shock to realize that the eyes within were glaring. He was

dressed with the last extreme of shabbiness, in a long threadbare and almost ragged waterproof, and they thought they had never seen before a face and figure so symbolic of desolation and dreary tragedy. It seemed to Wotton that he himself had his first real glimpse of those depths in which despair manufactures the many revolutionary movements which it had been his duty to combat, but, of necessity, his duty prevailed.

He stepped up to the man, asking him who and what he was and why he had thus evaded the police blockade. The man appeared to ignore the other questions for the moment, but in answer to the question about what he was, his tragic lantern jaw moved and emitted a very unexpected reply. "I am a Clown," he said in a depressed voice.

At this answer Mr. Pond seemed to start with altogether a new sort of surprise. He had ruminated on the puzzles hitherto, like one pursuing the study of things which some might find surprising but at which he himself was no longer very much surprised. But he gaped helplessly at this as a man does at a miracle, or still more, in a case like this, at a coincidence. Then another and yet more undignified change came over him. It can only be said that, having begun by goggling, he ended by giggling.

"Oh Lord, this is an extra!" he exclaimed, and seemed once more broken up by almost senile laughter. "This has nothing to do with the story, but it is a marvelous addition to the pantomime. I always noticed that the chief features in the pantomime had nothing to do with the story."

But Sir Hubert Wotton was having no more for the moment of Mr. Pond's fanciful mysteries; least of all, of the last and most mysterious, the mystery of his mirth. He had already begun to cross-examine the stranger in the style of the police, and the stranger stood up to him with gloomy but unshaken lucidity. His name, by his own account, was Hankin, and he was a public entertainer who also gave private entertainments, who was, indeed, only too glad to give *any* entertainments in the depressed condition of his state of livelihood. He had an engagement to perform as clown at a children's party that evening and had insisted on the necessity of catching a particular train; nor had he been cheered by the assurance of the police at the entrance that regular trains for passengers would be running again in an hour, at a time that would make him too late for his appointment and lose him the first few shillings he had earned in many months. He had done what many such people would probably have been glad to do if they had had the activity and audacity and had climbed into the station by an unguarded loophole. This statement was made with firmness and simplicity and Pond evidently believed it, but Wotton was still smoldering with some suspicions.

"I must ask you to come with us to the waiting room," he said. "Have you anything about you to confirm your story?"

"I haven't got my visiting card," said the sombre Mr. Hankin. "I lost it along with my Rolls-Royce and my little castle in Scotland. But you can see me in my resplendent and fashionable evening dress if you like. I think that ought to convince you."

The man was carrying a shabby and misshapen bag which he lugged along to the waiting room, and there, before the staring eyes of Wotton, he stripped off his waterproof and appeared in a sort of white circus dress but for retaining his shabby boots and trousers. Then he dived into the bag and brought out a monstrous grinning and glaring white mask picked out with red ornaments and fitted it on his head. And there, solid and seemingly incredible before their eyes, was the genuine clown of the old fashioned pantomime such as they had been discussing.

"He came up through a trapdoor, I suppose we must say," murmured the awestruck Mr. Pond. "But I feel as if he had fallen out of the sky like the snow. Fate or the fairies have added this final touch; see how they built up gradually round us the whole palace of pantomime in this wilderness; first the firelight and then the snow and now the only original 'Here We Are Again!' Such a cosy happy Christmas! Screams of joy from all the tiny tots . . . oh my God, how ghastly it all is!"

His friend looked at him and received a second shock in realizing that the bearded face, though it still wore the elfish look of its first amusement at the accident, was in fact terribly pale.

"And the ghastliest part of it," said Mr. Pond, "is that I am going to complete your costume, sir."

He suddenly plucked out the poker from where it was standing in the fire, and it emerged already red hot. He handed it politely to the Clown.

"I may look like a pantaloon," he said, "but this will obviously be more suitable to the Clown. This is the red hot poker with which you make the Policeman jump."

Wotton stared at a scene to which he had now entirely lost the clue, and in the silence that followed the long platform outside resounded with a firm and heavy stride coming nearer and nearer. The large figure of Dyer the detective appeared framed in the doorway, and he stood as if turned to stone by what he saw.

Wotton was not astonished at his astonishment. He presumed that it was an astonishment like his own, at the irrelevant intrusion of the pantomime figure. But Pond was watching more closely, and for Pond that moment was the confirmation of the creeping suspicion that had worked its way into his mind for the last hour or so. Nobody could have been surprised at Dyer staring at the Clown. But Dyer was not staring

at the Clown. Nor was Dyer merely astonished; perhaps the most astonishing thing was that he was not exactly astonished. He was staring only at the poker, and he obviously saw nothing funny about it. His face was distorted by almost demoniac fear and fury, and he looked at the red pantomime poker rather as if it had been the flaming sword of an accusing angel. "Yes, it's the red hot poker," said Pond in a low and almost forced voice, "and it does make the policeman jump."

The policeman jumped; he jumped back three paces, and as he leapt, he loosened a big official revolver and fired at Mr. Pond again and again, the shocks of explosion shaking the thin shanty in which they stood. The first shot buried itself in the wall about an inch from Mr. Pond's domelike forehead; the other four went rather wild, for Wotton and the stranger had woken up to the situation and were struggling with the would-be assassin and forcing his hand away. Finally he managed to wrench his hand loose again and twist the pistol inwards upon himself; the body of the big man stiffened in their arms, and Dyer of the detective service lay dead on the floor before the dancing fire.

The explanation of events was given by Mr. Pond some time later, for his first action after the catastrophe left no time for explanations. He had repeatedly, at intervals, looked at the clock in the waiting room and seemed satisfied, but he was leaving nothing to chance. He darted out of the door, raced down the platform, and found his way to the telephone box he had used earlier in the day. He came out wiping his brow in spite of the cold but wearing a smile of relative relief in the midst of the tragedy. When asked what he was doing, he answered simply, "I was telephoning a description of the package. It'll be all right now; they will hold it up."

"Do you mean *the* package?" asked Wotton. "I thought that was just like all the rest."

"I'll tell you all about it presently," replied Pond. "Let us go and take a polite farewell of the public entertainer who has given us such a delightful entertainment. I really think we ought to give him a fiver or so in compensation."

Wotton was very much the gentleman, in the more generous sense, and he heartily agreed to this, and though it was difficult for the melancholy man with the horse face to produce anything nearer to a laugh than a neigh, he was manifestly much cheered internally and his gaunt face was cracked with a crooked smile. Then, by way of finishing their Christmas feast on this curious scene of festivity, the two friends adjourned to the one and only refreshment room and sat down behind two tall glasses of beer, having no taste for warming their hands at that rather too blood-red fire that still burned in the sinister waiting room.

"It was curious you were able to corner Dyer like that," said Wotton. "I never had a thought of him."



"I never had a thought of him either," said Pond, "and he cornered himself, just as he killed himself. I fancy many conspirators are really chasing themselves into corners like that. Don't you see that he locked himself into a logical prison when he would empty and close the whole station to impress us with his efficiency. By the way, I ought to have guessed there was a double meaning in his dictatorial ways and demands to override the Constitution; he was talking exactly as our enemies and their foreign friends talk. But the point is this. I wasn't thinking about him particularly; I never thought of him at all until I found him wandering about inside the logical square or enclosure, like a rectangle in geometry. I was thinking all the time about one thing: what would these people probably do to divert or intercept the box now that they could hardly do it by direct attack or anything that made a noise? I was more and more convinced they would try to redirect it somehow, so that its going normally through the post would serve them and not us. So I warned the authorities to stop all altered addresses on suspicion, and I said to myself, What will the enemy do now? What can he do, shut up in this enormous shed, bare of all conveniences and appliances? But don't you see that with that very thought came the overpowering suspicion of who the enemy was?

"Nobody was there but you and Dyer when I said I had phoned to stop all altered addresses. I know in a mystery story I should have to allow for the station being thronged with silent eavesdroppers, a spy up the chimney and another crawling out of the luggage, but in practical life it doesn't happen. We heard the one and only intruder when he began to scramble up from the street. The man who did hear it was Dyer, and notice that he almost immediately wandered away up the platform, professing to find our luncheon place for us but really striding up and down and brooding upon what the devil he should do next, for I am sure his original plan had been to alter the address as I suggested. Was there anything else in that bare, beastly place he could use for the same purpose or another similar purpose? There was. But I never guessed what it was until I came back to the waiting room and happened to look at the poker. I saw it was twisted at a slightly different angle; that could only mean it had been red hot and hammered half crooked like a horseshoe on the anvil. And then, of course, I realized that a red hot poker would serve as well as a pen or pencil, or rather better, for altering an inscription on a wooden box. A pen could only cross it out, but a poker could burn it out. Managed neatly, it might well remove all trace of there ever having been any label or previous inscription at all. But it would do a great deal more than that. The clown is not the only artist who wields a poker; there is the whole elegant craft called poker-work. It would be quite easy to change the whole appearance of a white deal box, so that it would no longer be classed with

the other boxes; running a black border round it, covering it with a pattern, perhaps blackening it almost entirely. Then in one blank space left he would brand the address he wanted it to reach, very plain in black block letters, avoiding incidentally all the dangers of being traced by handwriting. The thing would have gone through the post to that address as a separate thing in an ordinary way, and our scheme for posting it in an ordinary way would have recoiled on our heads. As it was, I was just in time to describe the poker-work box and stop it. I made a silly joke about a red pencil marking black, but even then I had barely begun to suspect Dyer. I'm ashamed to say the only person I began by suspecting was your unfortunate clerk Franks, who is rather exceptionally innocent."

"Franks!" exclaimed Wotton. "Why on earth did you suspect him?"

"Because I was an ass," said Pond, "and much more like a Pantaloon than you may imagine. He's a queer-looking fellow, but I ought to have known that suffering sort of look is more often conscientiousness than unconscientiousness. But where I was a priceless ass was when I looked at the suspect instead of looking at the detective. At that moment Dyer was holding the box up looking at it very closely, and Franks, from the other side, could see that he made a minute mark on it very unobtrusively so that he would know it again. Franks knew about the box scheme, and seeing that very swift and furtive act, he started and stared, and I don't wonder. In fact, Franks was the real detective and was far ahead of me, for I hadn't suspected Dyer at all. Not till, so to speak, I actually found him like a burglar on the premises. I might say on the logical premises." He coughed slightly. "Pray excuse the pun."

"Well," said Captain Gahagan when Wotton had told him the story long afterwards. "My favorite character in your drama is the Clown. He is so irrelevant. I am like that myself. I am so irrelevant."

"You are," said Sir Hubert Wotton, and resumed the study of his documents.

"He is like the Clown in Shakespeare," went on Gahagan with unchanged buoyancy. "The Clown in Shakespeare seems to be there by accident, unconnected with the story, and yet he is the chorus of the tragedy. The Fool is like a fantastic dancing flame lighting up the features and furniture of the dark house of death. Perhaps we may connect Pond and Polonius after all." And he continued to illustrate his theory of the buffoons in Shakespeare, a dramatic poet to whom he was fervently devoted, quoting large portions of the plays in question in the old oratorical Irish fashion, to the no small aid and acceleration of the business of the department, busy at the moment with oppressing and delicate problems about American claims concerning the commerce of Vancouver.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**N**amed one of the "100 Favorite Mysteries of the Century" by the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association (see below), Richard Rosen's entertaining **Strike Three You're Dead** is back in print in a durable trade paperback edition. If you missed it the first time around, this Edgar winner for Best First Novel introduced readers to professional baseball player Harvey Blissberg. Harvey has a career, he thinks, with the Boston Red Sox when he suddenly finds himself traded to a new expansion team in Providence, Rhode Island. This brings back all his doubts about his future, the meaning of life, and so on; the capper, however, is finding his young teammate Rudy Furth dead in the whirlpool. Rosen went on to write more Harvey Blissberg sports-cum-murder tales, but most fans will agree that he was at his most winning in this baseball mystery. (Walker, \$8.95)

The number of Tess Gerritsen fans should swell with the publication of her latest, **The Surgeon** (Ballantine, \$24.95). Dr. Catherine Cordell is the single survivor on a list of women targeted by a psycho in Savannah. It was she, in fact, who shot the man while he was torturing her in her own bedroom. Now several years have passed. The cardiac surgeon has pieced together a new life and a practice in Boston, but then the unthinkable happens. Someone is killing here, using the exact methods of the man Catherine shot. She quickly goes from suspect status to next target as the cops—especially a prickly female detective and a widower who is attracted to the doctor—frantically try to figure out how a dead serial killer has come to life to menace women in their city. Thrills a minute, with a dollop of romance, will keep readers on the edge of their seats.

Another Anne Perry entry with Victorian private investigator William Monk at the center is always welcome, and **Funeral in Blue** (Ballantine, \$25) does not disappoint. London is again the setting, but this time Perry uses a double murder as the backbone of a story that is fleshed out in two fascinating directions. The first is the venue, for the

victims—two women—are found murdered in the studio of a popular artist. The second concerns the revelations regarding one of the victims, the wife of Dr. Kristian Beck, the Viennese surgeon who works so tirelessly at the hospital where Monk's wife Hester also works as a nurse. Fans of this series are also aware that Hester's friend and Monk's benefactor, the wealthy widow Callandra, has long had an unrequited passion for Beck. When Beck is put on trial for the murder of the two women, it is up to Monk to race the clock in an effort to clear him. The biggest mystery remains: how in the world does Anne Perry manage to keep writing novels with fresh new stories while at the same time giving her readers that comfortable sense of the familiar? No one does period mysteries better.

Kay Hooper follows in the footsteps of the estimable Mary Higgins Clark, proving that she can add a smidgen of the supernatural to the tale of a beautiful, accomplished, gutsy woman in jeopardy and come up with her own brand of thriller. To further hook readers, Hooper backs up her heroines with a supporting cast of repeat characters, several men and a woman who work in a special FBI unit that draws on their psychic gifts. In **Touching Evil** (Bantam, \$6.99), sketch artist Maggie Barnes is once again called in by the Seattle police. Her cop buddies will admit that Maggie has something: she interviews victims, and from the skimpiest of facts she somehow draws a portrait of the criminal. More than once it has led them to their suspect. This time, however, the killer is blinding his victims. This time Maggie's second sight will put her in danger, dead center in the sights of an especially cruel psychopath. Readers drawn to this type of thriller will be rooted to the spot.

Charles Todd garnered outstanding reviews for his first novel, and subsequent additions to this unusually strong series have been similarly received. His newest, **Watchers of Time** (Bantam, \$24.95), reprises Ian Rutledge, the Scotland Yard inspector who survived his World War I service but returned to England shell-shocked and broken. Rutledge is a survivor, however, and his scarring experiences have left him with a deep well of compassion, an eye for human failing, and a nose for the truth—not to mention the presence of the stalwart Scot who died under his command. In this case Rutledge is sent to a village where a popular priest has been murdered in his own house. Local officials have ruled it a burglary gone sour, but the district's bishop remains unconvinced. So does Rutledge. Some of the answers he finds in the past: a family's shame buried in the ruins of one of the best-known disasters of the day. Todd's portrait of Rutledge and postwar England remain powerful in this fifth book in the series.

On a much lighter note, Denise Osborne has come up with a winning combination in **A Deadly Arrangement** (Berkley Prime Crime, \$5.99): feng shui and mystery. Feng shui is the ancient Chinese practice of

*(continued on page 142)*

# THE STORY THAT WON

The July-August Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Joyce Huff of Waldorf, Maryland. Honorable mentions go to John Boileau of Tantallon, Nova Scotia, Canada; Andrew

McAllister of Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada; Susan Loper of Great Bend, Kansas; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Vir-



ginia; Sharon L. Near of Puyallup, Washington; Evelyn Goldstein of Orlando, Florida; Ed Ridgley of Phenix City, Alabama; Mark Truman of Laguna Niguel, California; Jan Strei-

lein of Aiken, South Carolina; David Magnusson of Hialeah, Florida; and Ron Mayer of St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada.

Hulton / Liaison Agency

## BAIT AND TACKLE by Joyce Huff

"Nice day for fishing, isn't it?" the stranger remarked. He took a seat facing Harold across the small stream and opened his tackle box.

"Yep." Harold removed his pipe from his mouth to reply.

"Catch anything?" asked the stranger.

Harold laughed. "No one ever catches anything here."

"Why are you here, then?"

"For the peace and quiet."

"That's all right, then," said the stranger. "I'm here on my doctor's orders. A nervous condition, see?" He held out a trembling hand.

The stranger baited his hook.

"Good thing you're not expecting any fish," said Harold. "No one's caught a thing here since the last lottery."

Confused, the stranger simply smiled and nodded.

"I was lucky in that lottery," Harold continued.

"Win, did you?"

"No," said Harold. "Sarah Maloney won."

Harold smoked in silence for a moment.

"We never should have used poison on her," he said pensively. "It's always been a blow to the head before. Nice and clean and environmentally friendly. I told those idiots, 'If you toss her in there with all that junk in her system, it'll kill all the fish.' But would they listen to me? No. This younger generation has no respect for the old traditions."

Harold stopped talking. The stranger had gone, leaving some of the contents of his tackle box behind in his haste. Harold smiled.

"Teach him to use my private fishing hole," he muttered. There was a tug on the line. "Well, what do you know," he said, "I got a bite."

(continued from page 140)

strategically placing objects in one's surroundings in order to increase the positive energy there. As Salome Waterhouse, heroine and practicing feng shui consultant, declares, it has become very popular in the West. Osborne has created a personable character in Salome, a middle-aged woman of independent means, divorced after a long marriage and partnership with a popular crime fiction author. The backdrop is Salome's hometown, a picturesque village in an enchanting part of the country, the coast of Monterey. Add to these the dark secret harbored by her family's mansion (and the scene of the murder), the return of her very first boyfriend, and the doings surrounding the art world, and you have a romp that's fun and informative.

Here are two suggestions for bibliophiles. Brothers David C. and John S. Major have collaborated on **100 One-Night Reads** (Ballantine, \$12.95), a collection of must-reads (in their opinion) that includes eleven works of crime fiction. Walter Mosley, Joseph Hansen, John D. MacDonald, George V. Higgins and Patricia Highsmith share the stage with Graham Greene, Eric Ambler, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Joseph Conrad, and Robert H. Van Gulik. (Now try guessing which books they chose.)

Perhaps more to the point for readers of AHMM, editor Jim Huang has compiled a volume titled **100 Favorite Mysteries of the Century**, as selected by the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association (Crum Creek Press, \$12). The century in question is the twentieth, and the selections are occasionally surprising (for instance, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*—a great choice in this reader's opinion). The selections are arranged by decade, which is also interesting. I defy any mystery lover to resist counting the number of winning books he or she has heretofore overlooked. After that, the Shopping List of choices in the back of this little book provides an easy reference. It includes current in-print status, similar to the life list appendix at the back of Audubon field guides: you can check each book off as you read it. In addition to the lists, which include a helpful one of the member mystery bookstores, there is a short review of each novel, penned by a mystery bookseller. All in all a fun read and a good reference work. This would make a great gift for any booklover.



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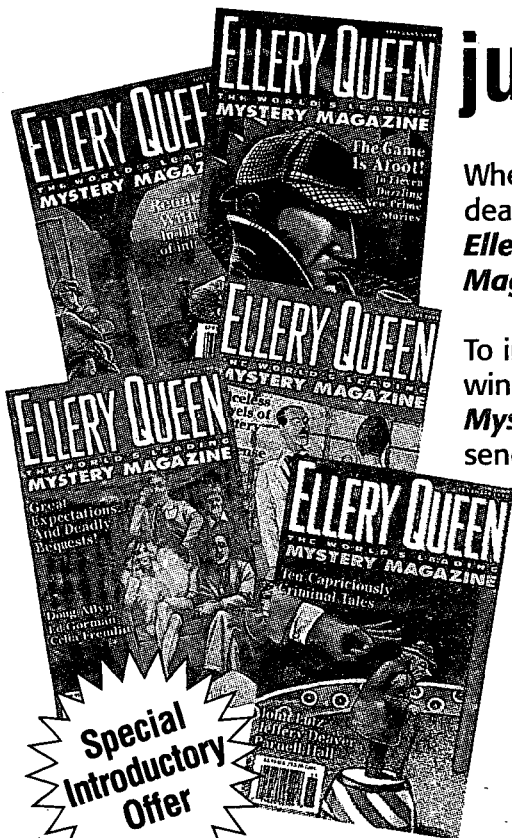
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